

CHINA'S TIBETAN DILEMMA

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The fortieth anniversary celebrations commemorating the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were very likely a subdued affair in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). The announced theme of the celebrations, "Love the People's Liberation Army and the People's Armed Police," probably did not elicit much enthusiasm from the Tibetans. The Tibetans' sentiments for anniversaries were perhaps best expressed by their demonstrations in December 1988 at the fortieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, when they called for Chinese observance of those rights, and in March 1989 at the thirtieth anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan rebellion, when martial law was declared. The TAR has been closed to foreign press and tourists since March 1989, and little is known about conditions for Tibetans at present.

China's hopes for a gradual diminution of Tibetan "local nationalism" have been set back by the recent disturbances and the persistence of Tibetan separatist sentiments. Tibet remains a problem for the PRC even after forty years of generous doses of traditional Chinese assimilation attempts and intensive application of Leninist theory and Stalinist methods for dealing with minority nationalism. The difficulties for the Chinese have been increased by the popular (if not state) support received by the peripatetic Dalai Lama and by his recent receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize. Although China has attempted to minimize the Tibet problem by construing the issue as solely economic rather than political, the Tibetans continue, whenever they are able, to express reverence for the Dalai Lama and to demand political self-determination. The Chinese continue to blame all Tibetan discontent on reactionaries, foreign imperialists, and the "Dalai separatist clique."

China "liberated" Tibet in 1950. The Chinese came armed with the historical assertion that Tibet had never been an independent country at all but only a part of "multinational China," and with an ideology that ascribed nationalism exclusively to the upper exploiting classes. China's claim to Tibet was based upon a historical relationship whose character was interpreted in accordance with traditional Chinese political ideology. The concept of Mandate of Heaven, or universality of Chinese culture, arose from China's formative experience of cultural assimilation predominating over ethnic differences. Being cultural rather than ethnic, the ideology was freely assimilative; the Chinese state absorbed barbarians as a matter of policy in state formation and as a matter of necessity in frontier defense. The ideology of universal Chinese cultural and political dominance was maintained by interpreting all foreign relations as evidence of loyal vassalage and submission by other nations.

Within this ideological framework all relations with Tibet, even seventh century marriage alliances, were interpreted as Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.

The Chinese Communists expected that the manifestations of Tibetan local nationalism would succumb quickly to the social and economic benefits offered by socialism and the assistance of the "advanced Han nationality." Chinese policy in Tibet was distinguished by an aura of initial confidence due to the possession of a doctrine in harmony with the inevitable course of history and a proven policy for the solution to the nationalities question (as well as a large degree of what in periods of self-criticism was described as "Great Han Chauvinism"). The Chinese thought that although the Tibetan upper classes might prefer independence, the lower classes could be won over by social reforms and taught to recognize that their true interests were represented by socialist internationalism. Ultimately, they believed, as formulated by Mao Zedong that "the national question is in essence a class question."¹ The issue in relation to Tibet was construed by Chinese propagandists as a question of social and economic reforms rather than political status. China embarked after 1950 upon a campaign of further obfuscation of Tibet's political status by constant propaganda about the "dark, cruel, and reactionary" nature of the former Tibetan government and the social benefits and economic progress achieved after liberation.

SINO-TIBETAN RELATIONS

At times during its history Tibet has fallen under the sway of Chinese (actually Mongol and Manchu) control; nevertheless, Tibetans have maintained a consciousness of themselves as an independent nation.² A strong and cohesive Tibetan national identity had been formed by a common cultural adaptation to a unique environment and a universal devotion to Buddhism. Political unity, however, was fragmented by territorial regionalism, the individualism and independence characteristic of nomadic and mountain peoples, a system of essentially feudal (indirect) political relationships, and the requirements of a theocratic political system.

Tibetan political independence, established by the Tibetan kingdoms between the seventh and ninth centuries, was compromised by the system of political patronage that the Buddhist Church adopted in the thirteenth century. The Church had become the strongest locus of power in Tibet after the collapse of the Tibetan monarchy. Because of the unique characteristics of a political authority which renounced the use of force, the Buddhist Church could establish and maintain undisputed political authority only with the patronage of foreign military powers. The Tibetans, whose Buddhism was the high literary and cultural expression of Inner Asia, provided ideological legitimacy to the Mongols and Manchu in exchange for political patronage. This system allowed the Tibetans to avoid both invasion by the Mongols and

1. See Liu Chun, *The National Question and Class Struggle* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1986).

2. See Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa, *Tibet: A Political History* (New York: Potala Publications, 1984).

direct administration by the Manchu and gave them great cultural and spiritual influence in Inner Asia.

The Tibetan political system and style of foreign relations were adequate for an era of vague and indirect political relationships and indefinite borders. When the system shifted to one of clearly defined states, Tibetans found that their independence had been compromised by the relationships of the past. Tibetans emphasize, however, that their relations were never with non-Buddhists, meaning essentially that they had never acceded any political authority to Han China. Although Tibetans are now characterized as but "one of the nationalities of multinational China," the Tibetans have a strong sense of national identity and tradition of independence. Their incorporation into the PRC was accomplished with relative ease, but their assimilation has proven extremely difficult.

TIBET WITHIN THE PRC

Unlike the Soviet Union, which is organized as a federation of separate nations that have "voluntarily" joined together, the PRC was established as a "unitary multinational state." China claimed that none of the Chinese minorities was a cohesive group exclusively occupying a distinct and separate area (although Tibet clearly fulfilled these qualifications). All of the Chinese minority nationality territories were claimed as integral parts of China which had voluntarily adhered to the Chinese state.³ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintained that the PRC was composed of nationalities (one of which was the majority Han nationality), not nations.⁴ The form of incorporation of the Chinese state was to be according to the collective wishes of all nationalities, which meant, of course, union with the Han. A new "nation" supposedly was created by this amalgamation, but this creation obviously would have the characteristics of the majority "nationality."

The PRC also rejected the Leninist doctrine of self-determination (after 1949), claiming that China, unlike the Soviet Union, had never been an imperialist state and had therefore never colonized other nations against their will. The distinction was made on the grounds that pre-revolutionary China had not been capitalist; therefore, according to Marxism's exclusive identification of imperialism with capitalism, China could not have been imperialist. The CCP maintained that the self-determination of China's nationalities had been decided, once and for all, by their common revolutionary struggle and voluntary incorporation in the PRC.⁵

The CCP was initially reassured of the correctness of its policy by the success of the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet in 1950; although achieved under

3. Zhou Enlai, "Some Questions on Our Policy Towards Nationalities," *Beijing Review*, 3 March 1980.

4. The distinction was based upon Marx's and Engels' subjective evaluation of a nation's history and its independent economic viability. Nationalities were small or insignificant and were not considered capable of surviving the transition to socialism.

5. Chang Chih-i, *The Party and the National Question in China*, trans. George Moseley (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), 57.

military pressure, entry to Tibet was gained without Tibetan resistance or international protest. Tibet appealed to the United Nations, without avail. Tibet's international status was obscured by Tibetan adherence to the political relationships of the pre-nationalist era and by China's claim that Tibet had always been part of China. Tibet was accorded a treaty of incorporation within the Chinese state (Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet). This agreement, although unilaterally imposed, had some of the characteristics of an international treaty. Tibet was guaranteed no changes in its political or social systems; the PRC was to assume responsibility for defense and foreign affairs, a situation not too dissimilar to the relations Tibet had had with the Ching Dynasty. Tibet was aware of having lost its claim to independence, but Tibetans maintained that this result was achieved only by force after Tibet's international appeal for assistance was ignored.

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Tibet, or at least the part of Tibet included within the Tibet Autonomous Region (approximately one-half of the population and territory of traditional Tibet), was distinguished by its exception from the policy toward all other national minority areas. The PRC pursued its policies during the 1950s in the TAR with caution but with the conviction that the socialist transformation of Tibet was ultimately inevitable. The Chinese used this period to make the transition from the special status accorded to Tibet under the Seventeen-Point Agreement to a status like that of other minority areas in China. After securing physical control of the Tibetan plateau during the period from 1950-1954, the inauguration of the "Preparatory Committee for the Autonomous Region of Tibet" in 1955 was the first step toward Tibet's new status. The Preparatory Committee superseded the Dalai Lama's government and was therefore essentially in violation of the terms of the Seventeen-Point Agreement.⁶ China continued to claim adherence to the intent of the agreement up until 1959, while accusing the Tibetan government of violating the agreement by its resistance to Chinese reforms.

After 1955 China began to accelerate the process of "democratic reforms" for minority nationalities (land redistribution, class differentiation, and denunciation and suppression of the exploiting classes), but the major campaigns were held in abeyance in the TAR. Reforms were initiated in the Tibetan

6. See George Ginsberg and Michael Mathos, *Communist China and Tibet: The First Dozen Years* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1964) and *The Question of Tibet and the Rule of Law* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1959).

areas of Gansu, Qinghai, and Sichuan. Tibetans in the areas outside the TAR were not accorded any of the concessions of the Seventeen-Point Agreement. Tibetan monasteries were depopulated by forced marriages, arrests and economic reforms. Monastery wealth, according to Tibetans, systematically was removed and trucked to China. Lamas and "upper strata reactionaries" were persecuted and arrested or executed publicly. Tibetan children were forcibly taken to China for "education."⁷ However, the Chinese attempt to redefine half of Tibet as part of the Chinese provinces and half of the Tibetan population as already Chinese backfired when revolt began in Kham (Sichuan) and Amdo (Qinghai and part of Gansu) in 1955-56.

Tibetan resistance plus the remnant of the Chinese respect for the exceptionality of Tibet and the authority of the Dalai Lama convinced the Chinese to slow the pace of reform in 1956. The last great deviation from the inevitable course of history planned for Tibet came in early 1957 when the Chinese granted broad concessions to the Dalai Lama, including no reforms for six years and fewer Han cadres in Tibet, in order to secure his return from India where he had been permitted to attend the 2500th anniversary celebrations of the birth of the Buddha. After the return of the Dalai Lama, the concessions promised to Tibet soon fell victim to the leftist campaigns of the Great Leap Forward, which featured a less compromising position on minority nationalism. Rebellion in Amdo and Kham quickly accelerated and spread to Central Tibet (the TAR) in 1958-59.

All of Tibet's exceptions from Chinese programs for national minorities were eliminated by the revolt, the flight of the Dalai Lama and dissolution of the Tibet Local Government in 1959. Chinese embarrassment at the failure of their policies (as well as a perceptible relief upon gaining a completely free hand in Tibet) is evident in the plethora of Chinese propaganda publications during this period.⁸ These publications claimed that Tibetans literally were dancing with joy at the fall of the "government of serf-owners" and that social and political conditions were advancing on all fronts. Tibetan refugees told a completely different story: of mass arrests, forced labor and deaths, persecution of Buddhists, social and political coercion and famine in 1960 induced not by the failure of Tibetan agriculture, but by PRC exactions for its own personnel.⁹ After 1962 Tibet was closed to the outside world to an extent rare even for a country traditionally renowned for its isolation. Accounts in the Chinese press about Tibet were limited to assertions of unprecedented progress and unrestrained Tibetan enthusiasm for socialism and for the leadership of the CCP and Mao.

Approximately 100,000 Tibetans have fled their country since 1959 under extremely difficult conditions. The Tibetan government-in-exile now claims that more than one million Tibetans have been killed since the Chinese takeover in 1950. Exact figures are impossible to ascertain, although accounts

7. See *Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic* (Geneva: International Commission of Jurists, 1960).

8. See *China's Tibet: Chinese Press Articles and Policy Statements on Tibet, 1950-1989* (Cultural Survival Tibet Project, 1989).

9. See Dawa Norbu, *Red Star Over Tibet* (New York: Envoy Press, 1987).

of Tibetans indicate that many political and religious leaders were executed (especially in the areas outside the TAR), that many died during the fighting in Eastern Tibet (1956-59) and in the TAR (1959), and that many were killed while trying to escape to India.¹⁰ The Chinese dismiss the Tibetans' statistics by claiming that the population of Tibet (the TAR) in 1950 was only about one million; therefore one million deaths is preposterous. The Chinese essentially have redefined Tibet as the TAR and the Tibetans of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan (approximately two million) as Chinese.¹¹

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The most severe cultural destruction in Tibet occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Many Red Guards were sent to Tibet from Beijing and Shanghai. Their factional polemics are most remarkable for their total irrelevance to, even denial of, the special conditions of Tibet. Although the PRC now claims that Tibet suffered no more than any other part of China, in fact Tibet epitomized all of the "four olds" against which the campaigns were directed, and the destruction in Tibet proceeded accordingly. There were Tibetan Red Guards, and Tibetans participated — sometimes even willingly — in the destruction of monasteries, but the tone of the polemics clearly reveals that the energy and initiative (and the political coercion) for the destruction came from the Han Chinese.¹²

CHINESE POLICY SINCE 1980

The latest turn of events occurred in 1979 when, after a visit by Hu Yaobang and Wan Li, Chinese policy in Tibet was liberalized and Tibet was opened to foreigners. China also initiated contacts with the Tibetan government-in-exile which led to five inspection tours by the Tibetans in India. The Chinese seem to have been severely shocked by the tumultuous reception which these delegations received and by the negative reactions of foreign

10. See *Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic*.

11. Figures for the Tibetan population are disputed and for the early 1950s can only be estimated. Chinese estimates for all Tibetans are 2.7 million in 1954. The Tibetan government-in-exile claims a total of six million Tibetans. However, China's argument is blatantly mendacious as the Chinese government is certainly aware that the population of Tibetans is more than that of the TAR. China's generally accepted redefinition of Tibet as exclusively the TAR has been one of its most successful diplomatic and propaganda coups. See June Dreyer, *China's Forty Millions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976); and *Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic*.

12. See *Tibet: 1950-1967* (Hong Kong: Union Research Institute, 1968).

observers to the conditions in Tibet and the record of Chinese improvements there. The Chinese reaction was characterized by a remarkable misperception of their own achievements in Tibet and the ways in which these achievements would be regarded by independent observers. It also was marked by a miscalculation of the persistence of Tibetan local nationalism and the Buddhist religion. China nevertheless continued policies of liberalization in Tibet, causing increased expressions of Tibetans' long-repressed discontent and violent clashes beginning in October 1987.

China's policy in Tibet since 1980 (as in all of China) has been to promote modernization rather than socialism. The CCP has tried to ensure social stability through economic development and cooperation with the former upper strata in that development. The United Front strategy for alliance with the old upper-class families has been revived to involve the Tibetans in Chinese policy and to diffuse their sympathies for separatism. The Panchen Lama's Kangchen organization, which engaged in commercial enterprises and solicited funds for the reconstruction of monasteries, was the model for this strategy. The Chinese government apparently hoped to involve the exiled Tibetans in the same developmental model.¹³ An essential part of the plan for Tibet included the development of tourism, whose economic benefits and "cultural transvaluating" effects might divert attention from political issues. Tourism also would provide opportunities for control and manipulation of Tibetan culture by the marginalization of Tibetan national identity.¹⁴ The actual effect has been just the opposite. The Chinese could not control the independent tourists who were usually sympathetic to Tibetan culture and supportive of Tibetan nationalism.

An essential deficiency of the modernization policy is that it is incapable of providing legitimization, formerly provided by socialism, for Communist rule in China or Chinese rule in Tibet. In Tibet, modernization as the legitimating factor for Chinese rule is obviously insufficient, especially since Tibetans suspect that Chinese colonists benefit more than Tibetans. The strategy of CCP reformers required that the social forces unleashed by the reforms not undermine Party rule. The strategy has failed in Tibet and in China because economic liberalization inevitably has led to political changes. Economic reforms, especially decollectivization, have resulted in deterioration of the former means of social control and in a revival of traditional social organizations and autonomous political activities. In the fundamental debate between Chinese reformers and conservatives, the conservatives now predominate because they were correct in their prediction that economic reform would lead to a crisis of legitimacy for the CCP and to a loss of Party control.

The system of political control in Tibet has deteriorated since 1980 because of decollectivization, withdrawal of Chinese cadres from the villages and the disintegration of neighborhood committees. Tibetans' experiences since 1980

13. See Ronald David Schwartz, "Reform and Repression in Tibet," *Telos* Fall 1989.

14. Chinese tourism development has been described as the "Disneyfication" of Tibet. See Michael McRae, "Inside Tibet: Lhasa Blues: The Tourist Dilemma in Occupied Tibet," *Outside* May 1989, 56.

in rebuilding the institutions of their own society, especially Buddhism, have given them social autonomy and increased national solidarity. Ideological reeducation has been attempted since the riots of 1987 but with little success because of insufficient instruments for social control and a new spirit of resistance among Tibetans. Chinese policy in Tibet has degenerated to intimidation and, since the declaration of martial law, to the use of force. Attempts at ideological legitimation of Chinese policy in Tibet basically have had to be abandoned because of widespread Tibetan skepticism and resistance.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The official Chinese position on the Tibetan situation continues to be characterized by three main points: Tibet was never a country independent of China; Chinese rule has been beneficial to Tibet; and criticism of Chinese policy in Tibet is an "intolerable interference in the internal affairs of the People's Republic of China."¹⁵ China is extremely sensitive about the Tibet question because it challenges the most fundamental legitimating ideologies of the Chinese state and of the CCP. Tibet's rejection of Chinese rule is equivalent to rejection of the universality and superiority of Chinese culture. China's sensitivity to foreign interference and its anti-imperialist ideology disallow admission of any evidence of Chinese imperialism in Tibet. To admit that China's rule has not been beneficial to Tibet, but actually has resulted in the significant destruction of Tibetan culture, would be impossible for a government which believes in the benefits of socialism and which upholds the right of all nations to self-determination.

Economic and social liberalization, by allowing autonomous social forces to reemerge, inevitably has the unintended result of allowing an increase in political autonomy and a revival of ethnic nationalism.

The policy positions of foreign governments on the Tibet issue seek to preserve the status quo and their relations with the Chinese government. Many governments, especially that of the United States, call for increased respect for human rights in Tibet but exclude discussion of Tibet's political status or the issue of self-determination. Most governments purport to uphold the rights of self-determination, but few are willing to support the principle in practice. Most states have their own minority nationalist problems and all hope to avoid ethnic conflict, especially that promoted by neighbors. The

15. Ann Thurston, "The Chinese View of Tibet: Is Dialogue possible?" *Cultural Survival Quarterly* Vol. 12, No. 1 (1988).

essential question for governments is whether suppression and perpetuation of such conflicts is not more destabilizing in the long run.

Tibetan nationalist demonstrations have been linked to the student demonstrations in Beijing, not so much because of any contacts between Tibetan and Chinese activists but because of the similarity in methods of repression employed by the Chinese government in each case. Although the connections between the Tibetan issue and the Chinese democracy movement may seem to be tenuous, and there are some fundamental differences, there are some essential connections. The connections can be summed up as the fundamental issues of democracy and human rights; the difference lies in the issue of self-determination. At the recent organizational meeting of the Federation for a Democratic China in Paris, Yan Jiaqi called for respect for Tibetans' human rights and proposed a system of federation for the Chinese state in the hope of solving the Tibetan problem. Emphasis was placed upon the compatibility of a federal arrangement with the most recent proposals of the Dalai Lama for an association with China.¹⁶

The Chinese students' recognition of the rights of the Tibetans represents a significant improvement over the past positions of the Chinese government and the Chinese populace. However, their concessions remain essentially characterized by the beliefs and ideologies of the past. The Chinese students' misunderstanding of the Tibet issue was highlighted by the centerpiece of their Tibet policy: to reverse verdicts on the character of the Tibetan revolts in 1959 and 1989. The revolts henceforth would not be considered counter-revolutionary.¹⁷ That the Chinese delegates imagine that this verdict, couched in socialist terminology, is an essential issue for Tibetans is indicative of their inability to transcend their own past cultural and political ideologies or to allow freedom of choice for Tibetans. The Chinese students must ask themselves why the Tibetans, given free choice, would choose to join in federation with China.

Tibetan nationalism is similar to many other ethnic nationalist movements, especially those in the Soviet Union, which have revived under policies of social and economic liberalization. The Baltic nationalist movements especially have much in common with Tibet.¹⁸ Economic and social liberalization, by allowing autonomous social forces to reemerge, inevitably has the unintended result of allowing an increase in political autonomy and a revival of ethnic nationalism. Further economic liberalization in China is likely to produce a revival of regionalism and ethnic nationalism similar to that produced by political liberalization in the Soviet Union.

16. "Unofficial Statements Concerning Tibet by the Federation for Democracy in China," International Campaign for Tibet, 20 September 1989. The Dalai Lama's proposal for an associative status for Tibet rather than independence, although well-received internationally, has created dissension in the Tibetan community.

17. *Ibid.*

18. The Baltic states and Tibet all have long cultural traditions and compromised political status. They share a contemporary period of independence from the early twentieth century until their subjugation by Marxist states in 1940 and 1950 respectively. They have been subjected to similar assimilative policies and have demonstrated remarkable persistence of nationalist sentiments.

The fact that improved economic conditions and a somewhat liberalized political environment in Tibet have led to increased nationalist expression is indicative of the essential issue for Tibetans. Tibetan demonstrations have been distinguished by their nationalist emphasis, especially the carrying of the banned Tibetan flag and shouts for Tibetan independence. The problem in Tibet can hardly be confined to human rights unless those rights include self-determination. Tibetans' desire for self-determination is the ultimate political purpose which must be satisfied in order to achieve any solution — short of cultural genocide — to the conflict between Chinese and Tibetans. Until that purpose is achieved the conflict will likely continue to the detriment of human rights for Tibetans and of human rights and democratic standards in China.

The saliency of China's Tibetan problem is increasing for several reasons, as many are tied to world developments and some are endemic to the situation. The recent death of the Panchen Lama, besides eliminating the chief spokesman for the Chinese in Tibet and the only legitimate representative of Chinese rule, has created a unique problem. Since 1959 the Chinese have forbidden the recognition of any Tibetan Buddhist reincarnations, but now they themselves for their own political necessity must find the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. Their attempt to control and stage-manage this process is already creating resentment among Tibetans and demands for recognition of other incarnations.¹⁹ The Dalai Lama's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize can only add legitimacy to the Tibetans' cause and embolden foreign governments to ignore China's prohibitions against meeting with the Dalai Lama.²⁰

The connections between the Tibetan situation and that of Hong Kong are becoming increasingly evident, not least of all to the people of Hong Kong. The Seventeen-Point Agreement with Tibet is in essence identical to the treaty for reintegration of Hong Kong. Tibetans were promised no reforms and no change in their political or social systems. The system for autonomy practiced in Tibet will be applied also to Hong Kong, but the Chinese record with respect to autonomy can hardly engender confidence in that system.

The Chinese government apparently does not yet realize that its record in Tibet is relevant not only to the Hong Kong situation but also to Taiwan and to China's international reputation generally.²¹ Conciliatory action on Tibet by the Chinese government would be a great step toward creating confidence in itself and improving its international reputation.

19. The Tibetan system of political succession by incarnation is unique in the world. The system arose in the sixteenth century and gradually proliferated to include hundreds of incarnations. See Franz Michael, *Rule by Incarnation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982).

20. China has announced that any meetings with the Dalai Lama would be regarded as "interference in the internal affairs of the People's Republic of China" (*International Campaign for Tibet*, May 1989).

21. The Tibetan government-in-exile has proposed to the Chinese government a status for Tibet like that proposed for Taiwan. The Chinese response has been that the essential difference between the situations is that China controls Tibet (and therefore need not make concessions) while it does not yet control Taiwan.