

**Fifty Years of Resistance:
The Tibetan Struggle Against Imperialism and More
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Summarized by Timothy Doran

Is there a Tibet? Has Tibet always been a part of China? In the past 50 years, Tibet has been part of China because China has forced a close relationship with it. Before 1950, although Tibet bordered Chinese provinces, it had very few ties with China. The earliest record of Tibet comes from the late sixth/early seventh century, when Tibet became a militarized kingdom in central Asia. Tibetans marched into Xian and put up a puppet king for a while and went south of the Himalayas. Buddhism was introduced into Tibet. There is very little historical evidence to say that Tibet is part of China.

Mongols and Tibetans possessed very early ties before Genghis Khan, before the Mongols became world-conquerors. During the high point of Mongol dominance and power, the Mongols exercised considerable power where they ruled. However, Tibet was never conquered by the Mongols because it had special ties with them which, Tethong argues, made the Mongols believe that the Tibetans were subservient to them; and the Tibetan leaders acted deferentially toward the Mongols.

The only time the Tibetans had ties with the Chinese were during the short-lived Ming (1368 – 1644) and Ching (1644 – 1912) dynasties, more in the latter than in the former. This has to be understood in the context of the Ching dynasty toward Tibet; it adopted Tibetan Buddhism as its state religion. The Ching built monasteries near Beijing to keep priests and lamas happy. Complex arguments were made to find legitimacy for their rule. The Ching dynasty was aware of the Mongol tendency to regroup and then to become a recurring headache for China and central Asia. Many Mongols had already adopted much of Tibetan Buddhism and were close to Tibetan lamas including those in Kublai Khan's court, and Dalai Lamas were favored by the descendants of Genghis Khan. Pacifying the Mongols and preventing their unity was vital.

Tibetan Buddhism enjoyed the official patronage of the emperor during the Ching dynasty. While Tibetans were able to prevent themselves from being swallowed, they had to spend the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries preventing the expansion of British and Russian empires around them. These empires clashed in Central Asia. Tibet was part of the British calculation. Its status was complex as was the case with many states at the time. For example, the status of Afghanistan at the time was defined by the British use of the key word "suzerainty." If you didn't acknowledge their **sovereignty**, you acknowledged their **suzerainty**. You thus refrained from saying that these nations were independent but said that they were distinct and separate: a complex wordplay.

Most Tibetans agree that Tibet is a case of outright Chinese colonization and subjugation. One of the first major actions the People's Republic of China took was to send an army to actually invade Tibet, called technically the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet. A small Tibetan border army was vanquished quickly. Within 6 – 9 months a Tibetan

delegation was forced to sign a document in Beijing and to assert they were happy to be a part of this new China.

Tibet is not a small plateau in central Asia. The area of the Tibetan speaking people measures one million square miles the size of Western Europe. The population density is extremely low: only 5 – 6 million people live there. Is Tibet rich in resources? The Middle East, India and China regarded Tibet as a source of gold. The justification, still extant, for why the PRC came into Tibet is not for colonial reasons but because it was a **backward society**, undeveloped, oppressive, holding serfs and slaves and riddled with religious superstition. In the early 1950s, when some of the first Chinese government officials came to Tibet, there seemed to be a general level of great enthusiasm among Chinese officials who believed they were present to help and serve the Tibetan people. Many seemed quite sincere.

Tibetan society was forced to change its entire social and political system. This causes trouble. In the process of that change, right in the early stages, a few good projects were carried out: the Chinese established modern schools and built airports and real roads. However, Tibet got caught up in the early stages of the cultural revolution and suffered greatly: its artifacts, temples and monasteries were destroyed. The Chinese thought that Tibetan religious ideas had no redeeming value, although neuroscientists today are working with Tibetan religious scholars examine the functioning of the brain. Ideas that have become the basis of emotional intelligence and mindfulness training already existed in Tibetan practice.

When the Chinese did this, they made many basic errors in trying to administer Tibet. Tibet is a high country so for the last several thousand years Tibetans have grown barley, dairy products, and meat. China thought it needed to increase its food production. They planted wheat; after the third year, the crop dwindled excessively. The local Tibetan farmers already knew that wheat sucks up a great deal of nutrients from the soil, but barley does not. In addition to political upheavals in the 1960s, even basic agriculture suffered. For the first time in Tibetan history, pockets of famine occurred. Throughout the 1960s and up to the late 1970s, Chinese officials cut down the forests in Tibet in order to make room for wheat. Topsoil erosion occurred, which resulted in flooding.

Some environmentalists call Tibet the third Pole and say that we need to pay special attention to it ecologically. It is an important plateau that formed very late: 40 million years ago. The monsoons may have started after the plateau came into being. Most of the major rivers of Asia including Pakistan and India, such as the Mekong and the Yellow River, have their headwaters on the Tibetan plateau. The over 2 billion people in Asia will suffer if Tibet's ecology goes out of balance.

Over the past fifty years the party secretary in Tibet has always been Chinese. Even today this is true. But in a strange way all of this has worked against the plan in Beijing. Rather than finding Tibet happily incorporated into China, or finding the Tibetans calling themselves Chinese, there is instead a resurgence of Tibetan identity and nationalism that did not exist in a strong form for 1300 years. After China opened up in 1979, many scholars who had to toe the official line argued "Well, maybe the exiles have a point, but now history is history, and the people inside Tibet have adapted to the new

system and been educated to the new system.” But even though there has been tremendous upheaval and suffering, the spirit of the Tibetan people seems to be intact and vibrant.

The Tibetan government is in exile. The Dalai Lama was given asylum in India as an honored guest. Tibetans recognized wherever the Dalai Lama was as a seat of the leadership of Tibet. But the Dalai Lama and exiled Tibetans feel that they represent the old government. From 1960 a small parliament in exile was elected. Now it has some fifty people elected from the exile community. In 1995, the Dalai Lama stopped appointing ministers and instead, the parliament elected ministers. This group functions as a global entity but no other world government recognizes it. Recently, the parliament has given every Tibetan dual citizenship.

An audience member asks if there is anything positive that might have arisen from Chinese rule in the past 50 years. Tethong says that it is very difficult to point out anything positive that the Chinese have done. They may have made the Tibetans realize that the Tibetan lifestyle was very outdated and that the rest of the world was transforming technologically, socially, politically. Perhaps bringing about democracy and changing politics: but all this became tainted, Tethong argues, by China’s colonial attitude. China has spent billions of dollars in Tibet. But who is benefiting more? Tethong believes that this last question is very important.

Another audience member asks if there is any chance of cultural integration. Tethong answers that the Tibetans do not speak Chinese and did not historically do business with them, nor have they ever had many cultural interactions with them, except a small amount of trading in teas. The Tibetans were also too poor to import silk. So historically there have been no real ties culturally, ethnically, or linguistically.

Nor are there genetic ties. Genetic studies have shown that Tibetans adapted genetically to the plateau very quickly: it took some 3,000 years, one of the fastest adaptations ever known. Tibetans moved to that plateau some 20,000 years ago. Vegetation is limited, and the air is dry. And they developed the ability to produce additional oxygen in their blood. Their lungs are bigger. The precariousness of their existence made Tibetans very careful about the sacredness of nature even before Buddhism developed. Tibetans established, from the seventh century onwards, direct links with Indian Buddhism until the decline of Buddhism and the Muslim change in India. Scholars say that Tibetan Buddhism has today more Buddhist literature than any language does, including Sanskrit.