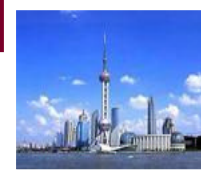




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China Newsletter - December 2013

China and Tibet

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China's relationship with Tibet has experienced many political and religious disputes during the course of the last 1400 years. These disputes continue to this day with China claiming sovereignty over Tibet, while Tibetans re-affirm their independence and point to long periods in their history where they enjoyed self-rule.⁴

The relationship between these two countries (I'll refer to Tibet in this newsletter as a separate country for the sake of clarity) began early in the 7th century when the then Tibetan ruler, Namri Lonsan, sent an ambassador to China. This was the first formal contact between the two nations. Over the next two centuries Tibet became a regional power whose influence extended from Bengal in the south to Mongolia in the north. Some of the lands which the Tibetans occupied during this time were claimed by China, but Chinese managed to re-take their lands back from the Tibetans after a period of conflict between the two nations.

Subsequent to the Chinese re-claiming their land, the Tibetan ruler allied himself with the Arabs and eastern Turks, who were enemies of China at that time. When China was defeated by the Arabs in 751, Tibet





resumed control of much of Central Asia. The Tibetans were militaristic during this period, and their armies conquered northern India, and seized the Tang Dynasty capital of Xi'an in 763. In 821 China and Tibet resolved their differences and signed a peace accord delineating the border between the two countries.³

However, as the Tibetan empire expanded throughout Central Asia, there was internal turmoil. Various power blocs within the Tibetan hierarchy were in competition with the ruler, thereby creating the Era of Fragmentation in Tibet between the 9th and 11th centuries. The result of this internal conflict was that the Tibetan empire collapsed. With this collapse the power structure within the country changed. Central rule was nonexistent between 842 and 1247, and the country was now ruled by warlords.¹

In the 13th century Genghis Khan was conquering the known world at this time, and Tibet aligned itself with this new conqueror by paying the Mongols tribute. As a result, the Mongols allowed Tibetans

greater autonomy than other lands which they conquered. But the Mongols still considered Tibet to be part of their empire and under their control. When the Mongols conquered China, they considered Tibet to be one of the 13 provinces of the Mongolian-ruled nation. Eventually, when Mongol China fell in 1368 to the ethnic-Han Chinese Ming, Tibet again reasserted its independence and refused to pay tribute to the Chinese Emperor. In the ensuing centuries, China was embroiled in its own power struggles and Tibet wasn't their central focus.³ As a result, China's influence in Tibet was almost non-existent until the mid-seventeenth century.

In 1645 the Tibetans commenced construction on the Potala Palace in Lhasa. This was to be a symbol of their new synthesis of power. Shortly thereafter, in 1653, China's second Emperor from the Qing Dynasty agreed that the Dali Lama would be recognized as the spiritual authority of the Qing Empire. China looks back at this relationship as one that relinquishes Tibet's independence. While Tibet, in



contrast, looks at this as a priest/patron relationship which doesn't diminish its sovereignty.³

The relationship between China and Tibet remained relatively stable until the eighteenth century, when Tibet entered a period of instability. When this occurred China's Qing Emperor Kangxi took advantage of this instability and seized two regions from Tibet. Three years later, in 1727, the Chinese and Tibetans again signed an agreement designating a boundary between the two nations. This boundary line remained in effect until 1910.³

In the late 19th century the British were attempting to expand their influence in Asia, and Tibet was important to their strategy of protecting India from the expansionist Russians. But the British were confused with whom to negotiate a Tibetan treaty, with China or directly with Tibet. The British finally concluded a border treaty with Beijing, but the Tibetan government, such as it was, flatly refused to honor it. The British then invaded Tibet, took over the capital, and concluded a treaty

with Tibet and China that gave them some measure of control over Tibetan affairs.

In 1911 the Chinese Revolution put an end to the Qing Dynasty, and Imperialistic China. As a result, the Tibetans expelled all Chinese troops from their land, and the Dalai Lama returned to Tibet in 1912. Tibet managed themselves as an independent nation. In line with this, in 1914 Great Britain, China, and Tibet met to fix Tibet's northern boundary lines with India. Great Britain and Tibet came to an agreement and signed the Simla Convention in 1914. China, however, walked out after a disagreement with Great Britain, and subsequently didn't sign the Simla Convention. This has resulted in conflict between China and Tibet as there was therefore no acknowledgement on the part of China of Tibet's sovereignty. China didn't have a chance to press the issue as Japan invaded Manchuria in 1910 and for some time continued its aggression east across China.

Tibet declared independence from China in 1913, after which time



the Dalai Lama acted as both the religious head of Tibet's Buddhist population as well as the political head of Tibet. In 1949, as the Communists were gaining control of China, the Kashag, the governing council of Tibet, expelled all Chinese associated with the Chinese government.

In the 1950s China again began to focus on Tibet and the People's Liberation Army invaded Tibet. Once in control they presented Tibetan officials with the Seventeen Point Agreement which affirmed China's sovereignty over Tibet. Part of the conflict between Tibet and China is over the "acceptance" of the Seventeen Point Agreement. According to the Tibetan government in-exile, some members of the Kashag never accepted the agreement. Tibetan exiles view the agreement as invalid because the agreement was signed under duress.²

China claims that Tibet has been an *inalienable part of China* since the thirteenth century under the Yuan (Mongol) empire or the Qing

(Manchu) one, and Tibet was therefore a protectorate. In this relationship, China contends, the Tibetans offered spiritual guidance to emperors in return for political protection. The Seventeen Point Agreement sought to clarify this relationship, but Tibetans say they were coerced into signing it and point to the fact that, between 1913 and 1950, they behaved like a de facto independent state which was not a part of China.⁵

China now refers to Tibet as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and, in 1978, initiated the "Western China Development Program" to dilute the Tibetan population and provide jobs for Han Chinese. Today 300,000 Han live in Tibet, with 2/3 of them residing in the capital city of Lhasa. The Tibetan population of Lhasa is only 100,000.³ The People's Republic of China classifies Tibetans as one of its 56 recognized ethnic groups.² Currently, no foreign government recognizes Tibet's government-in-exile.

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Endnotes:

1. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Tibet
2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Tibet_\(1950%E2%80%93present\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Tibet_(1950%E2%80%93present))
3. <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/china/a/TibetandChina.htm>
4. <http://www.cfr.org/china/question-tibet/p15965>

Alan Refkin

David Dodge

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