

### **13.A: A Brief History of Tibet**

**Capital:** Lhasa

**Population:** approximately 2.9 million (2010 Census)

**Size:** Comprises 12.8% of China's land mass and is roughly the size of Western Europe (United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, and Belgium)

**Languages:** Mandarin Chinese (official), Tibetan

**Religions/Beliefs:** Buddhism

Home to Mount Everest and the Himalayas, Tibet, or the "Roof of the World," is the most elevated ecosystem on the planet with altitudes averaging 4,000 meters (2.5 miles). Landlocked by mountain ranges on its northern, western, and southern borders, Tibet can be divided into three geographical regions: 1) the inhospitable Northern Plateau with its low temperatures, barren climate, and sparse vegetation; 2) the Outer Plateau that the majority of Tibetans call home; and 3) the subtropical Southeastern Plateau where the Yangzi, Mekong, and Indus rivers all originate. China's claim on Tibet as an autonomous region has given rise to the "Free Tibet" movement, yet Tibet endures despite its inhospitable climate and unresolved political situation. A devoutly Buddhist area with a fascinating history and unique culture, Tibet presents a story of survival shrouded in mystery and myth.

#### **Mythical Origins**

Bordered by Burma, India, Bhutan, Nepal, and China, Tibet has been isolated throughout much of its history, and thus little concrete evidence exists regarding its history before the sixth century. Furthermore, because the Tibetans are genetically quite diverse, the exact origins of the Tibetan people pose an even greater mystery. Some modern anthropologists trace the origins of the Tibetan people to the Mongoloid race, characterized by round skulls and short statures. Others believe that the Tibetan ancestors were of Indo-European descent, characterized by a long skulls and limbs. But whatever the genetic origins of the Tibetan people, two common myths or traditions of origin exist among the Tibetan people themselves.

In one version, based on a letter written by an Indian holy man, an Indian king named Rupati fled to Tibet after suffering defeat in an epic war against the Pandavas. King Rupati's followers sought refuge with him, and their migration and settlement resulted in modern-day Tibetans.

In another version, the Buddhist deity of compassion Chenresig took the form of a monkey and fathered six children with a mountain giantess in modern day Gangpo Ri. The offspring evolved into human ancestors of the Tibetan people.

### **Songtsen Gampo**

Tibet's documented history begins with the remarkable reign of Songtsen Gampo from 630 to 649. As the thirty-third king, Songtsen Gampo began ruling at age thirteen and made Tibet into an influential international force. As one of the most distinguished kings of Tibetan history, Songtsen Gampo also helped to mold Tibet's identity. Previous kings had already unified much of central Tibet and had expanded to the Chinese border, but Songtsen Gampo continued to push the borders as far as Northern India and soon posed a major threat to China's Tang dynasty (618–907), who feared for its western border in the face of Tibet's unchecked expansion. Instead of fighting battles against Tibet's powerful armies, both Nepal and China offered princesses for peaceful alliances through marriage.

These marriages helped mold Songtsen Gampo's subsequent policies. Greatly influenced by his two new wives, both devoted Buddhists, Songtsen Gampo became such a devout Buddhist that he declared *not* practicing the religion to be a crime.<sup>1</sup> He also commissioned the construction of the Jokhang and Ramoche Temples in Lhasa to house the Buddha statues presented to him as part of both wives' dowries and sent his minister to India to devise a system of writing so that people could access the Buddhist scriptures. The resulting Tibetan script in use today is thus a modified form of the Sanskrit used in Kashmir. Known as one of the greatest kings of Tibet's history, Songtsen Gampo expanded Tibet, introduced a written language, and popularized Tibetan Buddhism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Buddhism originated in India in sixth century B.C.E., spread into China via the silk trade routes, and by the Tang dynasty had a prominent role in Chinese life.

## **Bon, Buddhism, and the End of an Empire**

Before Songtsen Gampo's reign, the primary spiritual practice for most Tibetans was Bon, a form of shamanism. After the king's death, Buddhism dropped in popularity, and Bon regained its position as the major Tibetan religion. Shaken by the spectacular rise of Buddhism under Songtsen Gampo, Bon priests at this time carefully guarded against any king's support of Buddhism. The emergent tensions between the two religions would ultimately contribute to the end of the Tibetan empire in 842.

The tensions inherent between Bon and Buddhism also gave rise to the appearance of four different major sects within Buddhism: the Nyingmapa order, the Kagyupa order, the Sakyapa order, and the Gelugpa order. The oldest, the Nyingmapa order, originated in India and entered Tibet during the eighth and ninth centuries, although it failed to gain lasting popularity. During the Buddhist revival in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, the Kagyupa order and the Sakyapa order both emerged to compete for power until the final rise of the Gelugpa sect and the Dalai Lamas in the fourteenth century. While all of these sects belong under the larger umbrella of Buddhism, their doctrines and practices differ.

It would be a century after Songtsen Gampo's death before another notable king would emerge to further Buddhism as the religion of the Tibetan people. Trisong Detsen (r.755–797) rose to power and captured the Tang capital at Xi'an in 763 and Dunhuang, the home of the Thousand Buddha Caves, in 787. His conquests over China's cities marked Tibet as one of the most powerful forces in Asia. Despite his military prowess, Trisong Detsen was a devout Buddhist and declared Buddhism the national religion of Tibet. He restored temples, ordered new translations of scriptures, and founded the Samye monastery, the first institution in Tibet devoted to methodical translation of Buddhist scriptures and the training of monks.

The erection of the Samye monastery displeased Bon supporters, who vowed to stop the rise of Buddhism. As a result, Langdarma, a follower of Bon, assassinated his own brother, a Buddhist and Trisong Detsen's rightful successor. After seizing power in 836, Langdarma promptly began persecuting Buddhists, destroying Buddhist temples, and burning scriptures. Then, six years

later, a disguised Buddhist monk assassinated Langdarma, and the resulting disputes over inheritance of his crown tore Tibet apart for the next three centuries.

### **The Mongols in Tibet**

After its disintegration in 842, Tibet would never again go to war. Instead, the country gradually lost all of the territory it had gained from China and embarked on a period of peace and introspection to emerge in the late tenth century as the premier Buddhist nation in the world.

This time of peaceful introspection was shattered with the Mongol rise to power under Genghis Khan. The year 1206 saw the birth of the Mongol kingdom that enjoyed much of the same unchecked expansion as Tibet had in its formative years. As head of what today is Qinghai Province, Godan Khan, Genghis Khan's grandson, invaded Tibet in 1240. Intrigued by rumors of Tibetan lama spirituality, Godan Khan summoned Sakya Pandita of the Sakyapa monastic order to a meeting that resulted in a patron-priest relationship between the Mongols and the Sakyapa order. In exchange for peace, Sakya Pandita offered Godan Khan lordship over Tibet, and Godan Khan, in return, aided the spread of Tibetan Buddhism as the religion of the Mongol empire. De facto power resided with the head Sakyapa lama who also served as spiritual leader. The Sakyapa ascendancy was by no means peaceful, however, since other Buddhist sects were jealous of the Sakyapa's relationship with the Mongol court, and in 1354, the Kagyupa order overthrew the Sakyapa order and dominated for the next three centuries.

### **The Dalai Lamas**

Following the Kagyupa overthrow of the Sakyapa sect, another sect known as the Gelugpa (Virtuous) or "Yellow Hats" began to enjoy increasing popularity. In 1578, in a move parallel to Sakya Pandita's earlier meeting with Godan Khan, Sonam Gyatso (1543–88), head of the "Yellow Hats," met with Altyn Khan, the Mongol ruler. Impressed with Sonam Gyatso's wisdom and bearing, Altyn Khan bestowed upon him the name "Dalai Lama" ("ocean of wisdom") and offered Mongol patronage to the Gelugpa order. Thus began the reign of the Dalai Lamas in Tibet.

One of the greatest Dalai Lamas, Lobsang Gyatso became Tibet's first spiritual and secular ruler in the seventeenth century. Under his sovereignty, Tibet developed a strong sense of national identity, and the economy and culture flourished.

Precisely because of his prestige, Lobsang Gyatso's death was concealed for a decade until the secret was leaked and a sixth Dalai Lama hastily installed in 1695. The sixth Dalai Lama proved largely unsuited to the spiritual and temporal position, and in 1705, with Emperor Kangxi's<sup>2</sup> support, the Mongols invaded Tibet and kidnapped the sixth Dalai Lama, who died on the road to Beijing. Furious, other Mongol tribes who viewed the Dalai Lama as their spiritual leader attacked Lhasa in 1717 and fighting erupted. The conflict ended when the Qing court sent troops. Following his "liberation" of the warring nation in 1720, Kangxi installed a seventh Dalai Lama and declared Tibet a Chinese protectorate. The emperor also sent a battalion of Chinese troops and two Ambans, representatives of the Qing court, to govern Tibet. For the next two centuries, Tibet would be under the rule of the Qing appointed Ambans, a move that confined the Dalai Lamas to the spiritual realm. Although the Chinese had official recognition as the sovereign power in Tibet, in reality, the Tibetans controlled their own political affairs.

With the end of the Qing dynasty and the birth of the new Chinese republic in 1911, Tibet managed to oust remaining Chinese authorities and reinstall the Dalai Lama as both the spiritual and the secular ruler. However, Tibet enjoyed its autonomy for only a brief period of time. Its future rested upon the post-World War II outcome of the new Asian order and upon the outcome of the struggle between the Communist and Guomintang forces in China.

### **The Question of Independence**

The era following World War II saw many changes in Asia. In the south, India gained its independence from Great Britain in 1947. To Tibet's east, the Communists and Guomintang fought for control of China, newly freed from Japanese occupation. Caught in the middle, Tibet became a crucial buffer zone, and the country thus found itself locked in a complicated power triangle between India, Great Britain, and the Guomintang government in China.

---

<sup>2</sup> One of three remarkable emperors of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911)

Although the British had hypothetically withdrawn their influence from India, India retained a British representative to Tibet: Hugh Richardson, who had amassed a wealth of connections within Tibet. China viewed Richardson's continuing role in India as a ploy on India's part to ensure its political strength in Tibet, as Richardson played a crucial role in maintaining relations among Britain, India, and Tibet. Recognizing the political clout gained from having the British as an ally, Tibet encouraged relations with India as a neighbor and by extension, with Britain as a former imperial power. The Guomintang, formerly in control, claimed Tibet as a historical part of the Chinese territory. This began, they insisted, with the first patron-priest relationship between the Mongols (Yuan dynasty in the thirteenth century) and the Sakyapa sect and continued when the Kangxi emperor declared the area a Chinese protectorate in 1720.

Issues related to the planning of the Asian Relations Conference of 1947 highlighted the tensions. India, the host, invited Tibet and China as two separate nations, much to the fury of the Guomintang. In an attempt to rectify the political faux pas, conference leaders chose not to exhibit the newly designed Tibetan flag and on the world map they displayed, drew in Tibet as a part of China. These concessions, however, were only temporary solutions to a rapidly escalating situation.

In 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party founded the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong, Chinese nationalism rose to unprecedented levels. On September 2 of that year, the Chinese government declared:

The Chinese People's Liberation Army must liberate the whole territory of China, including Tibet, Xinjiang and so forth. Even an inch of Chinese land will not be permitted to be left outside the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China. We tolerate no longer the aggression of the foreign countries [Britain or India]. This is the unchangeable policy of the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese People's Liberation Army.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Shakya, Tsering. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*.

New York, Columbia University Press. 1999.

One year after the proclamation, the Chinese People's Liberation Army took control of Tibet, and despite Indian and British interest in the region, Tibetan calls for intervention went unheeded. Realizing its weakened status, a 1951 Tibetan delegation to Beijing signed the *Seventeen-Point Plan for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet* that stated, "Tibetan people shall return to the big family of the motherland—the People's Republic of China...Tibetan people have the right of exercising national regional autonomy under the unified leadership of the Central People's Government." In essence, Tibet was granted the same status as China's other autonomous regions (i.e. Inner Mongolia), but it would not formally become an autonomous region of China until 1965. With government-provided incentives, Chinese from neighboring regions soon began to flood Tibet.

### **During the Mao Years**

Although both China and Tibet called for a peaceful transition of power, sporadic uprisings in protest of Chinese power placed Tibet in the center of the world stage. Shortly after the seventeen-point plan went into effect, the Communist government under Mao's rule began to discourage widespread practice of Tibetan Buddhism. The Chinese in Tibet systematically closed monasteries, and the tensions culminated in the 1959 Tibetan uprising. Fearing that the Chinese were attempting to kidnap the Dalai Lama at the New Year celebrations, Tibetan people took to the streets. After three days of bloodshed and thousands of deaths, the Dalai Lama fled to India, marking the Tibetan leader's exile from the "roof of the world."

Not only did the Chinese government discourage Buddhism, but they also reworked the Tibetan system of agriculture into a series of collective farms and ordered Tibetan farmers to grow wheat and rice instead of barley. The ill-planned reorganization of the Tibetan agricultural system coupled with the surge in population from migrating Chinese resulted in a devastating famine that lasted for many years.

### **Reform and Opening**

Deng Xiaoping's rise to power upon Mao's death in 1976 ushered in a period of reforms within Tibet. Under Deng Xiaoping, Tibet once again opened its doors, and trade with Nepal and other neighboring areas flourished. Collective farms were abolished, as was the order to grow only

wheat. China also began to invest heavily in Tibet, building industries, roads, and encouraging tourism. Monasteries were reopened and restored, and religious restrictions on pilgrimages and worship were largely relaxed, leading to talks in the early 1980s between China and the Dalai Lama in exile about his possible return to Tibet.

The talks of return disintegrated within a few short years, and today, the Dalai Lama continues to live in exile in India. As the historical figurehead of Tibet, the Dalai Lama focuses upon promoting Tibetan independence through a strictly non-violent approach. To this end, the Dalai Lama continues to give talks, write books, maintain a website, and participate actively in promoting Tibetan independence on the global scene.

Despite the improving conditions in Tibet, in 1986, with the advent of major tourism to Tibet, the Chinese government became increasingly worried about the exchange of ideas between Tibetans and foreign tourists. On the one hand, the Chinese government recognized the need to bolster Tibet's economy, but on the other hand, tourists commonly sympathized with the Tibetan freedom movement. The tensions escalated in September of 1987, when a group of monks demonstrated outside Jokhang Temple and called for the Dalai Lama's return as well as Tibet's independence. The group of thirty monks soon swelled to include hundreds of bystanders, and police were called in to subdue the crowd. Four days later in October, in an incident captured by the world media, the monks once again marched outside Jokhang Temple, and this time, Chinese police used force to arrest the monks, inciting a crowd of 2,000 to 3,000 Tibetans to protest angrily, overturning police cars and throwing stones at the police. In response, the Chinese police opened fire on the crowd, killing several people and injuring many more.

### **Tibet in the Present**

Since the uprising of 1987, Chinese police have quelled numerous smaller uprisings. Many Tibetans and their supporters around the world feel that Tibet should be granted independence and the Dalai Lama and his government in exile allowed safe return to Tibet. Others feel that Chinese control of Tibet is a given fact and that Tibetan autonomy is a more reasonable goal. While the Dalai Lama hopes to reclaim autonomy for Tibet and has named his own Panchen



Lama<sup>4</sup> as a figurehead in his absence, the Chinese have imprisoned the Dalai Lama's choice and have installed their own Panchen Lama. Although many in Tibet view the Chinese choice as the "fake one," politically, the Chinese Panchen Lama holds power in Tibet. In April 2011, the Dalai Lama also relinquished his political leadership—though not his spiritual responsibilities—to Dr. Lobsang Sangay, now the elected Prime Minister heading the government-in-exile.

The Chinese maintain that they have introduced positive changes to Tibet, building roads and industries. Furthermore, with the stated goal of fostering economic rebirth in Tibet and promoting a sense of unity between Han Chinese and Tibetans, the Chinese government completed a \$3.2 billion, 695-mile-extension of the railway from Xining, in Qinghai Province to Lhasa, Tibet's capital city. One can now travel by train directly to Lhasa from Beijing. Despite the numerous controversies surrounding the railway's construction, the scale and excitement surrounding the project and all of the economic and social implications resulting from its completion cannot be denied. While the economy has improved dramatically in Tibet, the majority of business owners are Han Chinese who have greater access to capital. The railroad could boost their comparative economic advantage over Tibetans, increase Han migration into Tibet, and further erode the area's cultural identity. The birth of the "impossible" railway built largely on permafrost serves as a symbol for the fragile relationship between China and Tibet.

Since March of 2009, that relationship has grown increasingly tense, with the self-immolations of more than 50 Tibetans by September 2012. While setting themselves on fire, these monks, nuns, students and farmers have called for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet, an end to Chinese religious and cultural oppression, and an end to the influx of Han Chinese into Tibetan regions. Many of the protests have occurred among young ethnic Tibetans in Western Sichuan province, Qinghai province, and northeastern Tibet in response to hardline Chinese rule. While the Tibetan government-in-exile and Dalai Lama have condemned and lamented the self-immolations, they have not called for a halt to the protests and have held Chinese policies responsible. The Chinese reaction has been to minimize news coverage, issue reminders about

---

<sup>4</sup> The Panchem Lama and Dalai Lama share a close teacher-disciple relationship. The Panchen Lama ("Great Scholar") plays a secondary role in leadership confined largely to the religious realm. He also helps to locate the reincarnation of the next Dalai Lama and vice versa.

the improved standard of living under Chinese rule, and to institute a strong military and security presence in Lhasa and around monasteries where immolations have occurred. Tibet has been closed to foreign travel.

By Diana Lin, Harvard University Graduate School of Education

**For further information:**

<http://tibet.net/>

His Holiness the Dalai Lama in exile maintains this website. It presents information from the Tibetan point of view.

<http://www.tibetjustice.org/>

A resource for historic documents with related articles

Levy, Patricia. *Tibet*. New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1996.

Mayhew, Bradley and Michael Kohn. *Tibet* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oakland: Lonely Planet Publications, 2005.

Shakya, Tsering. *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*. New York, Columbia University Press. 1999.

Spence, Jonathan D. *The Search for Modern China* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.