

Please Give China a Break

- Uncovering the Complex Truth behind Popular Myths about China and Tibet

Issues around China and Tibet have taken centre stage in some recent political debate. While different people may hold different views have different interpretations, reduction of the complex ethno-socio-economic-political dynamic behind the development of the recent turmoil into simplistic terms like “Chinese suppression” does not do justice to reality. Popular myths often contribute to the distortion of public views. This is particularly true when it comes to issues that are distant from daily public life. The purpose of this document is to provide its readers with some much overlooked, yet well documented, “arguments from the other side” that are rarely broadcasted on the supposedly objective and impartial media in the Western world. While some reader may not be entirely convinced by the evidence and arguments provided in this document, by demonstration the mere existence of such evidence and arguments, we hope to convey the fact that the issues around Tibet – and China in general – are, at least, not as “black-and-white” as commonly assumed. At this point in time, please put the emotions aside and give China a break. After all, **even if the Chinese government did not deserve a perfect Olympics, the Chinese people** - who worked so hard to raise their country from its post-revolution ruins to the current state of prosperity - unarguably **do**.

‘Your will is like the gathering of clouds,
your call like thunder;
From these comes timely rain
to nourish selfless the earth!’¹

From a Hymn by the 14th Dalai Lama to Mao Tse-tung in 1954, three years
after “the Chinese invasion”

Ancient history

Myth 1: Tibet has never been politically subordinate to China. The relationship between the Tibetan protector, the Dalai Lama, and the Chinese ruler was a priest-patron one.

Truth: Well documented historical records suggest otherwise:

- 1 During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 AD), several state bureaus and offices were set up in Beijing for the purpose of administering Tibetan affairs. The most prominent ones were
 - a) Zongzhi Yuan (总制院): Later renamed Xuanzhengyuan (宣政院), which dealt with Tibetan and Buddhist affairs
 - b) Three subordinate offices under Zongzhi Yuan called Xuanzhengshi Si (宣慰使司), in charge of military and civil administrations of Tibetan areasSome might, however, argue that during the Yuan period, China and Tibet were two separate countries unified under the Mongol Empire. The collapse of the Mongol, therefore, would mark the end of the China-Tibet unity. However....
- 2 When the Ming Dynasty replaced Yuan in China, the basic intuition for the handling of Tibetan affairs remained unchanged. It is, however, true that Ming’s control over Tibet was much weaker than that of Yuan.
- 3 Qing, or the Manchu empire, replaced Ming in the 17th century. In the 57th year of the Qianlong period (1792), after Qing troops put down the Gurkha incursion into Tibet, a set of regulations called Regulations for Resolving Tibetan (Matters) (西藏善后章程) were promulgated. These regulations established the equal rank of the *amban* with the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, and his direct authority to control political military, religious, financial communications, and transport matters²

¹ Gelder and Gelder, *The Timely Rain: Travel in new Tibet*

² E. Sperling, *The Tibet China conflict: History and Polemics*

Society

Myth 2: Prior to the communist takeover, Tibet was a “society dedicated to peace and harmony” where the people “enjoyed freedom and content”³.

Truth: Tibet before the 1950s was a backward feudalist society where secular landlords and theocratic lamas controlled majority of, if not all, the arable land. Serfs which constituted a major part of Tibetan population prior to the communist takeover lived miserable lives and often suffered inhuman treatment from their overlords.⁴

- 1 The overlords had no responsibility for the serf’s maintenance and no direct interest in his or her survival
- 2 As in a slave system, serfs were bound to their masters, guaranteeing a fixed permanent workforce that could neither organise nor strike nor freely depart
- 3 “Pretty serf girls were usually taken by the owners as house servants and used as they wished”⁵
- 4 The serfs were taxed upon getting married, taxed for the birth of each child and for every death in the family. They were taxed for planting a tree in their yard and for keeping animals. They were taxed for religious festivals and for public dancing and drumming, for being sent to prison and upon being released. Those who could not find work were taxed for being unemployed, and if they travelled to another village in search for work, they paid a passage tax
- 5 When serfs could not pay, the monasteries lend them money at 20-50% interest. Debtors who could not meet their obligations risked being cast into slavery (apparently life could be worse than it already is!)
- 6 Punishments inflicted upon thieves and runaway or resistant serfs include
 - a) Eye gouging
 - b) Pulling out of tongues
 - c) Hamstringing
 - d) Amputation
- 7 Why do people put up with such life? Because of religion. The poor and afflicted were taught that they had brought their troubles upon themselves because of their wicked ways in previous lives. Hence they had to accept the misery of their present existence as a karmic atonement and in anticipation that their lot would improve in their next life

³ Dalai La ma quoted in Donald Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*

⁴ M. Parenti, *Friendly Feudalism: The Tibet Myth*

⁵ L. Strong, *Tibetan Interviews*

More recent history

Myth 3: The 1959 riot was Tibetan people’s uprising against communist oppression

Truth: the 1959 riot was a military rebellion staged by Tibetan aristocrats. Part of the agreement between the PRC government and the Tibetan local government at the time was to maintain the privileges of the overlords and lamas, and only to implement reforms (abolishing of serfdom, redistribution of land etc) gradually. Having observed reforms that had been carried out in parts of the outer-Tibet – part of Tibet that has not been Dalai Lama’s jurisdiction since early 18 century when Emperor Yongzheng of Qing Dynasty incorporated parts of the Tibetan Plateau into adjacent Chinese provinces such as Qinghai and Sichuan (a purely administrative move with no military atrocity) – where land, parts of it, were distributed to the serfs, the aristocracy in Tibet started to worry about the possible loss of their privileges. With the encouragement and support of the United States (many of the leaders of the gorilla fighting force were secretly trained by the CIA prior to the riot⁶), the aristocrats organised a series of riots in various parts of Tibet, started in 1956 and culminating in 1959. According to a Western commentator “Many lamas and lay members of the elite and much of the Tibetan army joined the uprising, but the main the populace did not, assuring its failure”⁷

Myth 4: Chinese government committed genocide in Tibet. More than 1.2 million Tibetans died as a result of Chinese occupation

Truth: Tibetan population in 1953 were 1.274 million. The figure grew to 2.196 million in 1990⁸. If the exile government’s claim were true, the population growth without Chinese occupation would have had been 2.7%. Putting this figure into context, Tibetan population between 1953 and 1990 would have had been way higher than that of India (2.2%) – a country with more habitable environment - and of Former Soviet Russia (1.0%) – a country where 5-Child mothers are considered as heroines. It is important to note the following facts

- 1 The economic and social situations in Tibet in the 50s and 60s reflect the overall condition in China as a whole.
- 2 Periods of economic and social crisis were the result of well-intentioned, but poorly designed - and even-more-poorly implemented - policies
- 3 Demolishing of monasteries did not occur at the beginning of the communist takeover. It occurred mainly during the cultural revolution – a period of collective madness during which cultural institutions of all kinds were destroyed by the uneducated and ill-encouraged masses, and not something even remotely close to genocide
- 4 Family planning policy – more popularly, and incorrectly, known as one-child policy – does not apply as strictly to ethnic minority regions. People in these regions are encouraged to have only one child (for economic reasons), but are allowed to have two. Having more than two children, while still allowed, is generally not encouraged. This however, is due largely to economic rather than political considerations. Mao Zedong, the much hated Chinese dictator, in fact opposed the

⁶ K. Conboy and J. Morrison, *The CIA’s Secrete Ware in Tibet*

⁷ H. Deane, *The Cold Was in Tibet*

⁸ J. Banister, *China’s Changing Population*; Beijing Review, *Population of China’s Ethnic Nationalities*

idea of family planning for his entire life. The scholar who proposed the idea, Ma Yingchu, was jailed for promoting “reactionary thoughts”.

Myth 5: The 14th Dalai Lama is a noble saint, the practice of whom closely represents the authentic doctrine of Buddhism

Truth: It is ironic that the image of Dalai Lama has ascended in the past 50 years from the figurehead of a corrupt and exploitive regime to something close to a saint.

- 1 The 14th Dalai Lama has very strong tie with his family members – behaviour that is not strongly encouraged in Buddhism since practicing Buddhists are supposed to devote their lives to the Buddhist religion and the enlightenment of the suffering masses. More importantly, the family members of Dalai Lama, one time or another, served some very important role in his government-in-exile⁹
 - a) One elder brother, Gyalo Thondop, served as Chairman of the Kashag, the minister of security, and the Prime Minister of the government-in-exile. He also headed the CIA backed Tibetan contra movement in the 1960s
 - b) A sister-in-law served as head of the government-in-exile’s planning council and its Department of Health
 - c) A younger sister served as health and education minister and her husband served as head of the government-in-exile’s department of Information and International Relations
 - d) The list goes on
- 2 Dalai Lama consumes meat, which is in strong odds with Buddhist doctrine. He claims that he does so on a doctor’s advice following a liver complication from hepatitis. No scientific evidence, however, suggests that meat consumption is good for damaged liver
- 3 Most importantly, The 14th Dalai Lama did little to actually improve the lives of Tibetan people. As will be explained in length in the coming section, rather than fostering mutual understanding and peace, the Dalai Lama have been contributed significantly to the destabilisation of Tibetan society through spreading hatred and nationalistic ideology. Here’s a story

There was an old man, who tells his supporters that his country was invaded by an alien force. His people were killed; culture ruined; tradition lost; and religion threatened. His supporters got angry. Some of them got so angry they started protesting around the world. A small group of the extremely argy ones decided to wage attacks on the alien “invaders”, and set their houses on fire.... This man was Sheikh Ahmed Yasin. We call him, and his angry supporters, terrorists. We condemn what they do and refute what they say. Yasin was eventually assassinated by targeted Israeli missile strike in 2004

The same story goes for another old man. Yet we call him a holy man, and his angry believer freedom fighter...

The Recent Turmoil

Myth 6: The recent uprising in Tibet was the result of accumulating resentment against Chinese suppression

Truth: Such statement grossly understates the complexity of the socio-political reality in Tibet.

Different groups of Tibetans have very different feelings towards Han Chinese and the Chinese government

- 1 **Buddhist monks:** Before the Communist takeover in 1950, monks / lamas constitutes the privileged class in Tibetan society, owning massive areas of land and a large number of serfs, who, as we discussed before, were treated practically like slaves. The land reform that took place in the 1950s and, more extensively, the 1960s (after the failed military rebellion in 1959) distributed much of the land that was previously owned by the monasteries to the poor serfs and peasant, causing the economic and social power of the monasteries, as well as the wealth of the monks, to shrink. Later in the 1960, during the Cultural Revolution, former peasants and serfs are encouraged to condemn their former “exploitive masters”. Under popular pressure, some were even forced to involve in productive activities – something unthinkable to the monks when Tibet was under Dalai Lama’s feudal rule. It is therefore fair to say that the resentment among Tibetan lamas against the so-called oppressive Chinese rule has more to do with the loss of economic and political privileges than the loss of religious freedom. Religious activities are monitored closely in Tibet for the close tie between religion and politics - and in turn social stability, as is clear from the recent turmoil – rather than for the suppression of religion itself.
- 2 **Ordinary Tibetans:** The dynamics in play among ordinary Tibetans is very different from those among Buddhist monks. In the early years of the Communist rule, most ordinary Tibetan liked and supported the Chinese government (see Celder and Celder, *The Timely Rain*). Even as of today, some older generation Tibetans feel grateful for the Communist government and hang Mao’s portrait spontaneously in their living rooms. The resentment among ordinary Tibetans against the Han Chinese is a more recent phenomenon, and is most visible amongst the younger generation Tibetans who had no experience of the brutal lama rule and are dissatisfied with their economic situation, the making of which is a complex one.

After the “Opening and Reform” in 1979, the Chinese government invested heavily in the development of Tibet. Wealthy provinces and cities – such as Guangdong, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai - are encouraged to provide financial aid to fund infrastructural projects. Given the special political sensitivity of the area – created partly by the continuous campaigning of the Dalai Lama’s government-in-exile and the deep-rooted resentment among the Tibetan monks – the central government also implemented social welfare programs in Tibet that are nowhere seen in other parts of China (Tibet is the only province-level administrative region that receive central government subsidy of over 100% local government expenditure: total subsidies between 2002 and 2007 amount to over US\$12bn. Although still low compared to Western standard, Tibetans farmers and herdsman enjoy the highest medical coverage among Chinese; and their children are eligible for free education up to senior high school level – a rarity in China after the free market economic reform - with food and accommodation provided).

Welfare subsidies, however, do not create wealth on its own for the local Tibetans. To some extent, they in fact dampened the incentive among ordinary Tibetans to seek employment or explore new business opportunities created by economic reform and development. At the same time, business-savvy Hans (the ethnic group that constitutes over 90% of China’s population) and Hui (Chinese Muslims) – either spontaneous migrant in search for new wealth-generating opportunities which are increasingly rare in the inner heart land or descendants of the construction workers, who helped develop the basic infrastructures in Tibet – was quick to settle

⁹ M. Backman, *Behind Dalai Lama’s Holy Cloak*

in to the new market place and became the wealthier class in Tibet. As have been witnessed in so many other places around the world, economically dominant ethnic minorities are rarely loved and welcomed: British in Zimbabwe, Ibos in Nigeria, Lebanese in West Africa, Jews in Russia, Croats in Yugoslavia, Chinese in Indonesia and Whites in Bolivia, to name but a few. In most, if not all, of these cases, ethnic hatred fuelled by market-created economic inequality erupted into brutal violence, which not only led to the killing and abuse of the market-dominant minorities, but also left deep chronic wound on local economic and social establishments (See Amy Chua, *The World on Fire* for detail). The recent Tibetan riot is little more than another example of such kind of ethnic conflict outburst. Rather than the violation of human rights, relative poverty and the dissatisfaction with minority dominance of local economy are the major causes of resentment among ordinary Tibetans. This would explain why, along side the Han Chinese, Hui (Muslim) minorities, who dominates Lhasa's meat trade, are also targeted and attacked.

Despite being a preacher of peace, love, and compassion, the words and deeds of the 14th Dalai Lama intensifies the hatred felt among Tibetans from both groups. The provocative terms used in his speeches and statements such as “gross violation of human rights”, “cultural genocide”, and “second class citizens” – none of which, as discussed above, is true – helped radical members of the ordinary Tibetans group to rationalise their sense of dissatisfaction beyond simple economic reasons. At the same time, his continuous campaigning around the world, which has received growing support from Western communities, has provided Tibetan monks with the illusive hope of a returning Lamaist state, and encouraged them to reject the reality of a modern world where the power of religion would inevitably subside.

In summary, the growing resentment among Tibetans against Chinese and the Chinese government is a result of the interplay among three cross-reinforcing factors: grievances for the loss of past privileges, dissatisfaction with minority dominance of local economy, and provocative actions taken by the government-in-exile. While some may disagree with this interpretation, the simplistic reduction of the complex dynamics that is shaping today's Tibetan society into a two-word phrase – “Chinese suppression” – would not do full justice to the entangled reality. And for supposedly knowledgeable and informed parties to subscribe to such simplification, one could not help but wonder whether it is a mere sign of ignorance or in fact something more sinister.

Myth 6: Chinese government's reluctance to engage in “meaningful dialogue” with the Dalai Lama is the key obstacle in reaching a constructive solution to the Tibet issue

Since the 1970, dialogue between the Communist government and the Tibetan government-in-exile took place in a number of occasions. While the Dalai Lama has altered his tone from “full independence” to “real autonomy”, the actual demands, claims and standpoints remained largely unchanged. These include

- 1 Tibet is historically and culturally an independent country, and was never a part of China before 1950 (The Chinese government suspects that this may lay the backdrop for complete independence in the future)
- 2 The Chinese government must remove all military presence in Tibetan. The political status of Tibet should be submitted to an international conference for multilateral discussion.
- 3 The power to conduct diplomatic affairs is to be vested in the autonomous government of Tibet

- 4 The boundary between autonomous Tibet and the Chinese heartland is to be redefined. The new administrative region of Tibet – i.e. Greater Tibet - would include all Tibetan-dominated areas in China. (This effectively would remark the Tibetan border that has been in place for some 400 years. 1/5 of Xinjiang province, 2/3 of Gansu Province, 2/3 of Sichuan Province, 1/2 Yunnan Province, and the entire Qinghai Province would become parts of the new Tibet, making it a state of over 2.4m square kilometres in area, covering a quarter of China's total land span)
- 5 Removal of non-Tibetan residence from Greater Tibet (As discussed above, Greater Tibet would encompass large areas of land in neighbouring provinces, all of which have had mixed ethnic presence for centuries)

Should the Chinese government agree to all these terms – something the Tibetan government-in-exile has refused to compromise for years despite the shift in their official rhetoric – China would lose its sovereignty over not only Tibet, but also a large area of land on bordering and adjacent to the Tibetan Plateau. More worryingly, implementing item 5 on the list would not only incur massive resettlement costs, but also lead to severe ethnical conflict similar to what India and Pakistan experienced after their separation in 1947, if not reminiscent to the disastrous impasse between Israel and Palestine. No responsible government in the world would agree to such unreasonable terms. And the unwillingness of the Tibetan government-in-exile to make material compromise, therefore, is the real obstacle to making constructive progress in resolving the Tibet issue – an issue that would not have reached to its current state had the Tibetan government-in-exile been less provocative in the pursuing of its political goals.

Myth 7: The Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile would make Tibet a better place for the Tibetans

Truth: The following facts suggest otherwise

- 1 The Dalai Lama was an ignorant ruler who overlooked the pain from which his people was suffering prior to the Communist takeover
- 2 He supported a military riot organised by the aristocrats in fear of losing their exploitive rights
- 3 His government-in-exile shows all signs of incompetence and dysfunction
 - a) Nepotism
 - b) Lack of transparency in every possible aspect
 - c) Using lies and ambiguity (with regard to the true situation in Tibet) to justify its legitimacy
 And he and his government have no proven track record of proper statesmanship
- 4 Rather than raising the living standard of the Tibetan people, the expressed priority of his government is to “preserve Tibetan culture and heritage” under a “democratic” framework. This is almost stereotypical ethno-nationalism in disguise – something proven to be disruptive to economic and social development (the latter are the things the Tibetans really need – which the Communist government has been trying very hard to deliver – although they do not necessarily realise, and may never realise until they actually lose them. But as history shows, rather than rational rethinking and self-reassessment, when democracy fails, people start pointing fingers and seeking scapegoats – behaviours that are not very constructive to say the least)

Conclusion

- 1 Despite all the myths and enigma around Tibetan Buddhism and the man himself, the 14th Dalai Lama – as the head of a government and an advocator of a certain political view - is above all a politician, and should be treated in the same way as any other politician. Statements like “more than a million people died” and “99% of the population is very very unhappy” would not be accepted without rigorous verification had it come from any other politician. Same standard of scrutiny should be applied to the 14th Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile
- 2 The Chinese government is not evil, despite its authoritarian nature. Like many other national governments in the developing world, it is inexperienced and incompetent due largely to the country’s relative primitiveness of its social development. It is not in the Chinese government’s interest to violate human rights, and it would be naïve, if not discriminative, to think that a government would harm its people just because it is Communist. Cases of severe violation of human rights, such as torture and harassment of prisoners, occur in China due primarily to corruption at local level administration and imperfections in the institutional infrastructure for the enforcement of law. They share more similarity with Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, than with Nazi Germany or Stalinist USSR
- 3 China is a great country with extremely friendly people and a highly embracive culture. Since “the opening and reform” in 1979, China has not only lifted hundred millions of people out of poverty, but also contributed enormously to the global economy by providing a low cost manufacturing base. The prevalent anti-China sentiment is an unfortunate result of the continuous interplay among socio-ideological stigma against Communist states, selective bias of Western media towards negative coverage, and provocation of ignorant / ill-intentioned politicians in pursuit of public support (the famous Brad Pitt film based on a story with dubious historic accounts written by a former Nazi officer also helped). Solving China’s problems – include but not limited to the Tibet issue - requires constructive solutions based on good understanding of local reality, rather than simple-minded campaigns founded around ill-conceived judgement. Ultimately, what this world needs is cooperation fostered by dialogue; not confrontation reinforced by prejudice.
- 4 Finally, China is a DEVELOPING COUNTRY with developing country’s problems. These problems are not unique to China, but are magnified and complicated by the country’s enormous size and population. While the Chinese government might be excessively cautious about stability, China is not an Orwellian Big-Brother-type state. To get a real sense of people’s life in China (or Tibet) today, there is no substitute to visiting the country and seeing for oneself. Welcome to China!

For comments, questions and discussion, please e-mail givechinaabreak@googlemail.com

Bibliography / Recommended readings

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