

Attempted Autonomy for Tibet: It's Time for a Focus Shift

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Since the Chinese government opened Tibet's borders to tourists in 1985, there have been several instances in which visitors find folded-up letters slipped into their palms whilst roaming the territory; letters addressed to the UN proclaiming the independence of Tibet, oppression by the Chinese, and loyalty to the exiled Dalai Lama (Schwartz 25), as noted by *The Tibet Journal*, a scholarly collection which features articles on Tibetan history. The conditions for this phenomenon have not always been the case, however. Historically, the nation of Tibet existed as a peaceful, Buddhism-oriented nation, until it was absorbed militarily by the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC)'s 1950 invasion. As an article from *The Journal of Asian Studies*, a scholarly and multidisciplinary journal focusing on topics within Asia, explains, this invasion was staged in response to Tibetan leadership making calls for official international diplomatic recognition, which was necessitated by China's outwardly expressed entitlement to the sect, as a result of hundreds of years of entangled history (Pommaret 232). Anupma Kaushik, Professor of Political Science at Dr. Harisingh Gour Central University, explains how the Chinese have since taken to suppressive and harsh methods to forcefully integrate Tibetans into Chinese society such as the intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and killing of lakhs of Tibetans, as well as the attempted erasure of thousands of years of Tibetan culture and history (Kaushik 78).

The long-term suppression the people of Tibet have faced since the 1950 Chinese invasion has garnered global attention to the Tibetan people, and the perseverance they show in holding on to their true national identity, despite continual subjugation from their invaders. The trade-off of moral determination in exchange for compromised freedom and safety illustrates how too much resilience could, in context, be a negative force- especially regarding being overly persistent with non-feasible goals, as stated in *The Dark Side of Resilience*, an entry in the *Harvard Business Review* by psychologists Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Derek Lusk. In this article, the co-authors discuss how those unwilling to compromise their goals often waste vital time and energy which could be applied efficiently to a less broad, more feasible goal. To the people of Tibet, this applies to the unwavering pursuit of full Tibetan independence despite the harsh retaliation of the PRC, which continues to erode Tibetan identity in retaliation.

In this paper, I will examine the ways in which Tibetans have been suppressed by the Chinese government, and different methods of Tibetan resistance, to answer the following question: How can the people of Tibet achieve autonomous goals while preserving their cultural identity? The world has its eyes on Tibet, and the ability or inability of Tibetans to regain their status as a country, taken away in China's 1951 annexation, could set the tone for future global disputes in the East regarding China. Please note that in 2023 "Tibet" is internationally recognized as a region of China, not as a sovereign nation, but the terms "national identity" and "nationality" will be used throughout this paper in reference to the once-nationhood of Tibet which resonates with modern citizens.

China's Main Offenses

The *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, a biannual peer-reviewed academic journal covering international affairs, reports China has used a multitude of tactics over the past decades to effectively ring out the ethnic uniqueness from Tibet, including razing of Buddhist

monasteries during the Cultural Revolution, forced “reeducation” of Buddhist leaders as well as harsh imprisonment of those speaking against the ethnic suppression (Davis 35). This deletion of two central Tibetan identity markers, Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan Leadership, has worked to significantly lessen the connection Tibetans feel to their national heritage. This is largely important to the Tibetan cause, as Tsering Topgyal, Assistant Professor in International Relations University of Birmingham states, identity insecurity is a prime motivator for Tibetan independence (Topgyal 523). Effectively, Chinese oppression attempts to dilute the culture built through hundreds of years of Tibetan history, which motivates Tibetans to act in self-preservation.

Beyond the immediate discouragement of Tibetan cultural practices, China has also given a great deal of effort into cracking down against another Tibetan keystone, its history, by enforcing the notion that Tibet has always been an integral part of China. Elliot Sperling, one of the world’s leading historians of Tibet-Chinese relations, reports that the PRC has long claimed that Tibet has been an inseparable or integral part of China since the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), to justify the subjugation of Tibet since 1950 (Sperling 28), and the uneasy assimilation of Tibetans into Chinese ways of living. Although this is heavily debated outside of Chinese studies (Sperling 24), the twenty-first-century rhetoric which China pushes out to the world and its citizens has remained steadfast. Unsurprisingly, the history of Tibet is interpreted differently by the Tibetans, who assert that historically Tibet has been at many points as diplomatically strong as China, but was forced to make concessions to China’s strong central government slowly over time (Kaushik 76). In another paper by Elliot Sperling, he reports that the PRC’s government has successfully impressed upon its citizens that Tibet is rightfully China’s, starting with campaigns post-invasion. Meanwhile, The Tibetans also began building a historical case for their independence following the 1950 invasion; a case which has evolved to strengthen their claim to autonomy (Sperling 102). Baogang He, Professor and Head of Public Policy and Global Affairs at Nanyang Technological University, and Barry Victor Sautman a professor emeritus with the Division of Social Science at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology reported in an article about the said case, through the perspective of Tibet’s cultural leader, the Dalai Lama, noting that since the late 1980s, the Dalai Lama has refused to even suggest that Tibet belongs to China. He stated in 2000: “The Beijing government often puts pressure on me and wants me to declare that Tibet is a part of Chinese territory. However, this is not a fact. I will not make such an erroneous statement” (He and Sautman 22).

This means that since the introduction of Chinese rhetoric on the world stage, Tibetans have had to continually make a conscious effort to resist the coerced historical narrative. Although tedious, this is a viable strategy, as the harshness of response from China to Tibetans promoting their true history has been unforgiving, indicating that the threat of a revealed history is one the PRC takes very seriously (Schwartz 20). Additionally, converting the accepted history of Sino-Tibetan relations to the Tibetan perception would undoubtedly bring Tibet international support and aid; when the narrative is corrected, Tibetans could utilize foreign pressure being applied to China to peacefully make grabs at their autonomy.

Attempts at Autonomy

As previously mentioned, the Tibetan people have not necessarily been complacent in tolerating Chinese rule, many Tibetans have made attempts to reach Tibetan autonomy, both culturally and diplomatically. Observing the patterns of successes and failures within differing

reaches for Tibetan autonomy can lead the Tibetans to find the most successful and long-term beneficial course of action to preserve the essence of their people and state.

Over the past 70 years, there have been several noteworthy Tibetan showings of desire for national independence, both through violence and non-violence. For example, the UK's Foreign Secretary to the Government of India, Olaf Caroe, explains that 1956 saw the breakout of Tibetan vs. Chinese troops' guerilla warfare. The Tibetan's attacks were countered with Chinese artillery fire into the residence of the Dalai Lama (Tibet's highest spiritual leader and national figurehead), resulting in his flee to India, where he remains today. Over time, outbreaks like these have slowed to a halt, but violence is still considered a viable resistance method for a minority of Tibetans (Caroe 9). The mainstream Tibetan resistance, however, realizes the ineffectiveness of violence like that shown in 1956 and has since shifted focus to peaceful tactics. Notably, Tibetan nationalists played off of the International attention on Beijing for the 2008 Olympics in order to openly, and peacefully, protest Chinese occupation. With all eyes on the PRC, Chinese officials gave in to pressures to meet with Tibetan leaders for discussions regarding the subject matter of the protests. In one of these meetings, Tibetan representatives extended a proposal for Tibetan autonomy under Chinese rule. Although these proposals eventually sputtered out within a few years, this instance was the most interaction Tibetans had ever had with the Chinese government regarding discussions on Tibetan independence, as noted by Connie S. Rosati, Contemporary Moral Problems professor at the University of Texas at Austin. This serves as evidence that through shifting to peaceful methods, Tibetans can get closer to their autonomy, with no lives lost or monasteries burnt.

Even more indicative of peace's potential for change, is the assortment of success stories from around the globe demonstrating the strategy's viability. For example, Nelson Mandela, a leader of South Africa's resistance to racial discrimination by a white minority, in a period known as The Apartheid, was arrested in 1962 for organizing an illegal strike on the South African government. Despite his oppression, he remained committed to peace as the singular method to achieve freedom, knowing how slippery of a slope violence was to his people, and his resilience during imprisonment eventually contributed to the end of apartheid in South Africa, as noted in his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Mandela, as Tibetan revolutionaries aspire to do, took a stand, with pacifism and patience, for his people and their rights, and achieved the ends to his means despite oppressive and disheartening resistance. (Mandela 2). If Tibetans not only continued to commit themselves to freedom but committed to a peacefully achieved and adaptive freedom, they could, no matter the pace of progress towards autonomy, achieve security for their national culture and identity. In fact, the preservation of this identity has given Tibet some of its largest gains against the PRC. The people of Tibet have used self-determination of regional culture as a way to stand against Chinese influence, leading to the development of regional advances in education and historical establishments, such as monasteries, museums, archives, and Tibetan festivals, as noted in an article published by the University of Washington Press, North America's oldest and largest publisher (Kolås and Monika). This bolsters the argument of focusing Tibetan attention on non-violent methods of resistance, such as intrinsically restoring their national identity, before turning to drastic measures which could provoke drastic retaliation against the region from the PRC.

Conclusion



In examining the history of Sino-Tibetan tensions following the 1950 occupation, the long-term suppression of Tibetans vying for liberation is indisputably disheartening to the case of Tibetan sovereignty. Tibetan citizens and leaders have sacrificed their freedoms through violent means of protest in order to resist Chinese rule; an unsustainable method of revolt that in the long term could lead to the total wipeout of those who proclaim to be nationally “Tibetan.” This is because the Tibetan demonstrations are directly met with Chinese resistance of the same caliber. This lends credibility to assertions made by Lusk and Chamorro-Premuzic, who concur that it is often more productive to relegate goals, such as Tibetan Independence, to more sustainable or achievable levels, such as a less immediate autonomy achieved through peaceful methods of protest. This directly channels the historical spirit of revolution which has borne social changes in the 20th century, notably Nelson Mandela’s unbreakable pneuma demonstrated in ending South Africa’s oppression of its black majority, comparable to China’s oppression of Tibetans.

To best maintain their cultural well-being in the face of the PRC’s methods to convert the region to nothing more than an extension of China, such as the adoption of false historical narratives and physical destruction of Tibetan symbols of identity, Tibetans should relinquish the idea of brute-forcing their way to independence and instead lean into peacefully methods to make gains. Violence, as seen in the 1956 incursion which resulted in the removal of the Dalai Lama from Tibet, has historically proved ineffective; Tibet simply does not have the military might to beat China at its own game. This necessitates a strategy change: Tibetan resilience needs to give way to Tibetan adaptability. The region should go all-in on making gains for not only diplomatic, but cultural independence from China, through non-violent and long-term methods. This could manifest as a continued emphasis on the restoration of Tibetan educational and religious facilities, as well as renewing the prospect of challenging Chinese revisions of history, in favor of exposing the raw truth to the world. Progress will undoubtedly come when Tibetans exclusively employ the weapons of adaptation, truth, peace, and determination in their fight for regional autonomy; the time for a focus shift has come.

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