

China's Favorite Propaganda on Tibet... and Why it's Wrong



It's no secret that the Chinese government sees propaganda as a key weapon in its efforts to battle the movement for Tibetan rights and independence. Luckily for Tibetans, Beijing's Orwellian rants—for example labeling the Dalai Lama a “serpent” and a “wolf in monk's robes”—have bordered on the hilarious. That is, until recently. Beijing's propaganda strategy is shifting to a greater utilization of Chinese and Western scholars and hand-picked Tibetan spokespeople. A leaked document from the Chinese Communist Party's Ninth Meeting on Tibet-Related External Propaganda in 2001 stated, “Effective use of Tibetologists and specialists is the core of our external propaganda struggle for public opinion on Tibet.” Beijing is also starting to send out propaganda tours of carefully selected groups of its Tibetan officials—always with a Chinese escort. In order to address these recent moves, Students for a Free Tibet has deconstructed Beijing's favorite propaganda points justifying China's invasion and continuing occupation of Tibet.

“Tibet has always ‘belonged’ to China”

This is Beijing's favorite argument, though the exact moment when Tibet supposedly became “part” of China keeps changing; it's variously said to have happened in the seventh century, the 13th century, the Qing Dynasty, or simply “always.” It's hard to do justice to two thousand years of Tibetan history in a few paragraphs, and the suggested resources at the end of this document give much more detail than we can put here:

- **The seventh century:** Beijing used to claim that the marriage of Tibet's King Srongtsen Gampo to Chinese Tang Dynasty Princess Wencheng in 641 A.D. marked the "union of the Tibetan and Han Chinese nationalities." It stopped claiming this when it was repeatedly pointed out that Wencheng was junior to Srongtsen Gampo's Nepali wife, Princess Brikuti, and that the Tang emperor was forced to give his daughter because of the strength of the Tibetan empire. In fact, the Tibetan army sacked and briefly occupied the Tang capital in 765 A.D., and the 822 A.D. peace treaty forced the Chinese to treat the "barbarian" Tibetans as equals.
- **The 13th century:** Beijing claims that Tibet became part of China during the Yuan Dynasty in the mid-13th century. The Yuan was actually a Mongol empire, with Chinggis Khan and his descendants conquering China and nations from Korea to Eastern Europe. For China to claim Tibet based on this would be like India claiming Burma since both were part of the British Empire. The Mongols never ruled Tibet as an administrative region of China, and Tibet was given special treatment because Tibet's Sakya lamas were the religious teachers of the Mongol emperors. By the fall of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, Tibet had again become in charge of its own affairs.
- **The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911):** Beijing is opposed to past Western and Japanese imperialism, but sees nothing wrong in claiming Tibet based on the Manchu Qing Empire. This claim doesn't stand up either. The Manchu rulers of China were Buddhists, and Tibet's Dalai Lamas and the Manchu emperors had a special priest-patron relationship called Cho-Yon whereby China committed to providing protection to the largely demilitarized Tibetan state. Chinese nationalists may see this as sovereignty, but it wasn't. As the relationship became strained, China at various times exercised influence and sent armies into Tibet - but so did Nepal during this time. China expanded its influence in Tibet after 1720, as a powerful country dealing with a weaker neighbor. It later tried to occupy Tibet by force, violating the Cho-Yon relationship, but with the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, Tibetans expelled the Chinese and the 13th Dalai Lama proclaimed Tibet's complete independence. Until the Chinese invasion of 1950-51, Tibet enjoyed full sovereignty as defined under international law: it had a territory, a population, a government exercising effective control, and the ability to enter into international relations (such as the 1914 Simla Convention with Britain, trade delegations to the West, and neutrality in World War II).
- **1951:** China claims sovereignty over Tibet from before 1951, but this is an important date. This is when after defeating Tibet's small army, China imposed the Seventeen Point Agreement on the Tibetan government, demanding that Tibet "return" to Chinese sovereignty (raising the uncomfortable question of why such a surrender treaty was needed unless Tibet was a country independent of China in the first place). This Agreement was legally invalid because of duress, but the Tibetan government had little choice but to try to coexist with China under its provisions. It became clear that Beijing had no intention to live up to its promises, and the Tibetan government fully repudiated the document during China's brutal suppression of the 1959 Tibetan uprising.
- **"Always":** Do we even need to respond to this? Irish Ambassador to the U.N. Frank Aiken said it best in the U.N.'s debate on Tibet in 1959: "Looking around this assembly, ... I think how many benches would be empty in this hall if it had always been agreed that when a small nation or a small people fall in the grip of a major power no one could ever raise their voice here; that once there was a subject nation, then must always remain a subject nation. Tibet has fallen into the hands of the Chinese People's Republic for the last few years. For thousands of years, ... it was as free and as fully in control of its own affairs as any nation in this Assembly, and a thousand times more free to look after its own affairs than many of the nations here."

“Old Tibet was a backwards, feudal society and the Dalai Lama was an evil slaveholder”

Beijing (as well as sympathetic Western scholars such as Michael Parenti, Tom Grunfeld and Anna Louise Strong) asserts that “pre-liberation” Tibet was a medieval, oppressive society consisting of “landowners, serfs and slaves.” Tashi Rabgay, a Tibetan scholar at Harvard, points out that these three alleged social classes are arbitrary and revisionist classifications that have no basis in reality. There were indeed indentured farmers in old Tibet. There were also merchants, nomads, traders, non-indentured farmers, hunters, bandits, monks, nuns, musicians, aristocrats and artists. Tibetan society was a vast, multifaceted affair, as real societies tend to be. To try to reduce it to three base experiences (and non-representative experiences at that) is to engage in the worst kind of revisionism.

No country is perfect and many Tibetans (including the Dalai Lama) admit that old Tibet had its flaws and inequities (setting aside whether things are better under Chinese occupation). But taking every real or imagined shortcoming that happened in a country over a 600-year period and labeling it the “way it was” is hardly legitimate history. Any society seen through this blurry lens would come up short. And in many ways, such as the elimination of the death penalty, Tibet was perhaps ahead of its time. The young 14th Dalai Lama had begun to promote land reform laws and other improvements, but China’s take-over halted these advances. It is instructive to note that today the Tibetan government-in-exile is a democracy while China and Tibet are under communist dictatorship.

The crucial subtext of Beijing’s condemnation of Tibet’s “feudal” past is a classic colonialist argument that the target’s alleged backwardness serves as a justification for invasion and occupation. These are the politics of the colonist, in which the “native” is dehumanized, robbed of agency, and debased in order to make occupation more palatable or even necessary and “civilizing.” China has no more right to occupy a “backward” Tibet than Britain had to carry the “white man’s burden” in India or Hong Kong.

“China ‘peacefully liberated’ Tibet, and Tibetans today are happy under Chinese rule”

Beijing’s line is that the Tibetan people, and particularly the peasantry, welcomed the “peaceful liberation” of Tibet and that it was they themselves who “overthrew the landlords.” In fact, China’s People’s Liberation Army decimated the 5,000-strong Tibetan army in October 1950 at Chamdo, eastern Tibet. There’s no question that some Tibetans initially greeted the Chinese (the communists claimed they were only there to “help develop” Tibet); that such welcomes were in the vast minority is equally clear. Tibetan histories of Tibet, such as Tsering Shakya’s *Dragon in the Land of Snows* and W.D. Shakabpa’s *Tibet: A Political History*, corroborate this. The late Panchen Lama’s courageous 70,000-character secret petition to Chairman Mao summarizes how the “liberation” negatively affected Tibetans of all walks of life.

Indeed it was the Tibetan peasantry, the very group the Chinese “liberation” was said to have helped, who formed the core of the popular resistance to the Chinese occupation. By 1959, a guerilla resistance movement called Chushi Gangdruk (“Four Rivers, Six Ranges”) that started in eastern Tibet had spread nation-wide. The resistance reached a symbolic culmination on March 10, 1959, when thousands of Tibetans surrounded the Dalai Lama’s Norbulinka Palace to act

as human shields to protect him from a rumored Chinese kidnapping plot (hardly the acts of a people longing to be rid of an oppressive Tibetan regime).

The armed resistance ended in the 1970s, at the urging of the Dalai Lama, but substantial popular resistance remains. This resistance has taken many forms over the years: pro-independence demonstrations, postering, mass non-cooperation, economic boycott, and risking the perilous Himalayan crossing to live as refugees self-exiled from their own homeland. Ronald Schwartz has written a book, *Circle of Protest*, analyzing ways in which Tibetans have used religion to express covert political messages. Chinese writer Wang Lixiong provides another analysis in an article entitled *Tibet: The People's Republic of China's 21st Century Underbelly*. Wang opposes Tibetan independence, but believes there is a risk of Beijing succumbing to its own propaganda. He recognizes the strength of Tibetan nationalism and pro-independence sentiment, and writes, "the military[s] role in sovereignty is only like a rope, which can tie Tibet to China, but cannot keep our bloodlines together over the long term."

"Tibetans are better off now than they were before the 'peaceful liberation'"

This incorrectly assumes three things: [1] that Tibetans are incapable of developing without Chinese intervention (a modern version of the "white man's burden"); [2] that Beijing's developmental priorities and ideas of progress are what Tibetans want; and [3] that material development somehow excuses the colonialist occupation of Tibet. Let's take these in order:

[1] To imply that Tibetans are incapable of developing their own country is insulting, condescending and chauvinistic. Nor is it proper to compare apples and oranges: Tibet five decades ago cannot be compared with today, since a free Tibet would not have existed in a vacuum in the intervening years. One only has to look at the model success of the Tibetan refugee community to wonder how much better life in Tibet could be if Tibetans were actually in charge of their own country.

[2] Yes China has developed Tibet, but urban Tibetans only benefit marginally and rural Tibetans barely benefit at all. Tibetans without Chinese language skills and connections are left to fend for themselves as second-class citizens in their own country. China's own statistics show Tibet's per capita income falls below that of all Chinese provinces, and vast areas of rural Tibet lack basic healthcare and education. Beijing's overarching priority is tying Tibet to China by moving in Chinese colonists to the urban areas and creating a Tibetan economy dependent on resource-exploitation and state subsidies. It is spending huge amounts of money on infrastructure to solidify its control, such as a railroad to Lhasa on which Beijing will spend more than what it has put towards healthcare and education in the entire 50+ years it has occupied Tibet. Some scholars such as Hong Kong-based Barry Sautman argue that these policies are beneficial to Tibetans and aren't colonialism because China isn't following the same demographic strategy as previous colonial powers. Nevertheless, Tibet today is a vast resource-extraction colony and its urban areas are filled with Chinese settlers. According to the UNDP in 2000, real GDP per capita in Tibet is \$169, as opposed to \$680 for China as a whole and \$4,000 in Shanghai.

Adult Literacy is 38% as opposed to 81% in China. Maternal mortality is 50 per 10,000 as opposed to 9 per 10,000 in China. All these show that China's much-vaunted "development" is skewed by political priorities (securing control, building infrastructure) and isn't benefiting Tibetans.

[3] Beijing would never argue that just because Hong Kong under British rule grew to become one of the world's major economic centers and enjoyed one of the highest living standards in Asia, this somehow justified British imperialism. It seems hypocritical for it to use exactly this line of reasoning for Tibet, whether factually valid or not.

“China has already granted Tibetans autonomy”

This argument is emerging as one of Beijing's new favorites, a way of combating the Dalai Lama's moderate proposals for a compromise solution. In its latest White Paper, Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet, Beijing claims that it has given Tibetans substantial autonomy rights already and that this means the “Tibet question” is solved. The reality is that this alleged autonomy is crippled by severe limits and by Beijing's ultimate control.

Autonomy in the so-called “Tibet Autonomous Region” is extremely limited, is granted or retracted at Beijing's will, and is based on power-relationships rather than clearly defined rights. Most fundamentally, it's hard to speak of “autonomy” when the government is controlled by a non-democratic, communist party dictatorship that prohibits independent institutions or organizations. Beijing's overriding concern in Tibet is “stability” (meaning fighting the independence movement) and all other concerns are subordinate. As a result, Beijing retains huge formal and informal ability to dictate policies in “hard” issue areas such as politics and law. There is a limited flexibility in “soft” issue areas such as culture and economics, but even this is subject to Beijing's ultimate power as shown for example by the strict monastery controls and incentives for Chinese settlers that Tibetans themselves would not willingly enact.

Tibet's lack of real autonomy is further underscored by looking at who the actual decision-makers are. Ultimate power lies in Beijing. Tibetans do occupy some figurehead positions such as governor of the “Tibet Autonomous Region,” but these officials are largely considered to be Beijing's puppets. Beijing doesn't trust the Tibetan cadres at lower levels, and is constantly trying to root out their private religious devotion and loyalty to the Dalai Lama. As a result, real power is exercised by Chinese officials in Beijing and Tibet including Tibet's communist party chairman, who has never been a Tibetan. The importance of the communist party can't be over-emphasized, because ultimate power in China comes through this body.

Beijing's unconvincing claims of Tibetan autonomy can't paper over the Tibetan people's unrealized right to self-determination. Even the U.N. General Assembly explicitly recognized this right in its 1961 resolution on Tibet (Res. 1723(XVI)). This right means Tibetans have the legal right freely to determine their own political status, and freely to pursue their economic, social and cultural development. Self-determination is a complicated issue, but to put it briefly: Tibet's history as a sovereign country and China's continuing and widespread violations of Tibetans' fundamental political, economic and other human rights give the Tibetan people the right to choose their own political destiny.

[An interesting note: Until very recently, Beijing referred to “national regional autonomy,” for example in the Seventeen Point Agreement it forced on Tibet in 1951. In the past few years, Beijing has instead been talking about “regional ethnic autonomy,” even rewriting history by altering the Seventeen Point Agreement in its contemporary textual references and web sites. This shift appears to be a belated realization that recognizing Tibetans (and other so-called minority groups like Uighurs) as a “nationality” gives support to their demands for self-determination. Oops! Some analysts also believe that if autonomy is redefined as an “ethnic” privilege, it will become

easier for Beijing to justify taking away all pretense of autonomy as Chinese immigration shifts the ethnic balance.]

“Tibetans in exile, especially the Dalai Lama, are a bunch of aristocrats seeking to reestablish the old regime”

The notions that the Tibetan refugee community longs to reestablish an aristocracy has nothing to do with the real aspirations of the Tibetan freedom movement. Currently there are over 150,000 Tibetans living in exile around the world; to characterize this group as “former aristocrats” is ludicrous when one considers their numbers and diverse backgrounds from Tibet.

Tibetans never saw their country as perfect and the Tibetan government-in-exile is not advocating reestablishing the system that existed before 1959 (nor would it be possible). The Dalai Lama has declared that he won't hold a political position in a free Tibet - despite that the vast majority of Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet would probably elect him in a heartbeat - and has laid out guidelines for a democratic free Tibet (see <http://www.tibet.com/future.html>). The government-in-exile is a democracy run by a prime minister (currently Samdhong Rinpoche) and parliament elected by universal suffrage in the refugee communities. The movement for Tibetan independence permeates all segments of Tibetan refugee society, as anyone who has spent time in the Tibetan refugee settlements in India or attended a Tibetan gathering in the West can attest.

“The Dalai Lama is a US government puppet out to ‘split’ China”

Beijing claims that the Dalai Lama's status as a “Western pawn” is proved by CIA funding to the Tibetan resistance fighters in the 1950s and '60s. Former CIA agents Kenneth Knaus and Tom Laird have both written books on the CIA's involvement in the Tibetan guerilla resistance movement, which movement was never controlled by the pacifistic Dalai Lama. These books and other historical documents and testimony show that the Tibetan resistance was very much an indigenous reaction by Tibetans to China's invasion of their homeland. Tibetans were willing to take any help against so large an occupying force, and the CIA's view of Tibet's utility in a global war against communism doesn't detract from the legitimacy of the Tibetan cause. The elites of the US and other liberal democracies now prioritize trade with China, and much of their pressure to act on Tibet comes from grassroots public sympathy.

“Human rights are China's internal affair”

Even if Tibet weren't an illegally occupied country and therefore a subject of legitimate international concern, the world still has a legitimate interest in Beijing's human rights abuses in Tibet and China. Certain human rights issues, like the prohibitions on genocide and torture, are *jus cogens* (peremptory norms of international law) that may never be violated. Other human rights issues are covered by the various international conventions that China has signed and/or ratified. The increased global focus on fighting terrorism, moreover, makes injustice anywhere harder to ignore and gives the world even more of a stake in finding a lasting, peaceful solution to the problems in Tibet.

Often directed at Western Tibet supporters:

“Anyone who hasn’t been to Tibet has no legitimacy in talking about it”

This is often said by someone who them self may never have been to Tibet, or whose own motives and interests are suspect. It is a line designed to perpetuate an unjust status quo by de-legitimizing a maximum number of people who could possibly challenge the injustice. Going to Tibet would undoubtedly be informative, and all Tibet supporters who can go should; visitors are usually struck by Tibet’s natural beauty, the warmth of its people, and a pervading sense of a land under military occupation. But you don’t need to go to Paris to know the Eiffel Tower exists, and you don’t need to be jailed in Tibet’s Drapchi Prison to know that political prisoners are tortured there.

For more information, the resources below are good places to start.

Tibetan government-in-exile:

- Tibet: Proving Truth from Facts, <http://www.tibet.com/WhitePaper/index.html>
- Tibetan Autonomy and Self-Government: Myth or Reality?, Tibetan Parliamentary and Policy Research Centre, New Delhi, India, 2000.
- Chinese government:
- Tibet - Its Ownership and Human Rights Situation, http://news.xinhuanet.com/employment/2002-11/18/content_633181.htm
- Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2004-05/23/content_1485519.htm

Other Governments and United Nations Resolutions on Tibet:

- <http://www.tibetjustice.org/materials/index.html>

Non-governmental organizations:

- Tibet Information Network: <http://www.tibetinfo.net>
- Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy: <http://www.tchrd.org>

Other Authors:

- Tsering Shakya, *Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947*, Columbia University Press, 2001. (A definitive history of modern Tibet by a pre-eminent Tibetan scholar.)
- Warren Smith, *Tibetan Nation: A History of Tibetan Nationalism and Sino-Tibetan Relations*, Westview Press, 1998. (A comprehensive history of Tibet.)
- Panchen Lama, 70,000 Character Petition (The Secret Report of the Panchen Lama), published by the Tibet Information Network as *A Poisoned Arrow*, December 1997, <http://www.tibetinfo.co.uk/pl-preface.htm>
- Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War: America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival*, Public Affairs, 1999. (A history of the CIA involvement in the Tibetan resistance movement.)
- Ron Schwartz, *Circle of Protest: Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising*, Columbia University Press, 1994. (Analyzes ways in which Tibetans have used religion to express covert political messages they cannot express outright.)