China vs. Tibet

Development of the conflict

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1 Introduction

The far-east-conflict between China and Tibet keeps the whole world busy. Almost everybody has heard about this conflict. Almost every TV station broadcasts the latest news about the development of the current situation with regard to the dispute between Tibet and China. More and more countries become involved and there is no way to avoid this discussion. Countries are forced to adopt a position on one side or the other.

However, why is the situation that difficult?

Furthermore, where are the sources of this conflict?

Which solution possibilities can be found?

These are the questions we will attempt to answer in this paper. Of course, we cannot go into the depth of Chinese and Tibetan history, because to do so would go beyond the scope of this paper. We will limit our descriptions to the most important historical events.

When writing about history, it must be clear that we will talk about its interpretation. Thereof we will have to describe the Chinese and Tibetan positions independent of each other.

It should be noted that our knowledge of language is limited, thus we cannot quote Tibetan or Chinese sources which would be relevant. Thus we will limit our research to English literature.

After discussing the history, we will take a look at the current debate of human rights and the social situation in Tibet. In addition to these facts, we will take a look at the attitude of the western industrial powers towards the conflict and explain two differing parties within the discussion.

Further on, we will try to give some suggestions for how to solve the situation.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the conflict’s history and to give some possible answers to the above questions. Within the following pages, we will discuss both sides of the dispute. We will try to remain objective, even though it is difficult to differentiate between the scientific from the public position.
3 History

3.1 China’s view

“For more than 700 years the central government of China has continuously exercised sovereignty over Tibet and Tibet has never been an independent state.”


The status of Tibet has been a subject of discussion and dispute in one way or another over centuries. China’s position in this question is that Tibet has always been an inalienable part of it. The clear evidence for the Chinese statement is historical sources. The following pages examine some of the major statements made by Chinese writers with regard to the position that Tibet has always been historical a part of China.

Tibet became part of China in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and has remained under the administration of the central government of China since then. The Yuan Dynasty, which included the Mongols, constituted formal regulations for Tibet. The Tibetans acknowledged the Mongol’s power and became formally part of the Mongol-Chinese Empire. According to the historical records of the Saga Monastery in Lhasa, the Yuan Dynasty divided Tibet into three military areas with 15 districts and Tibet was incorporated as one of the 13 provinces of China. The Yuan emperor also established the Ministry for the Spread of Governance to directly handle the main military and political affairs of the Tibet region.

When the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) replaced the Yuan Dynasty in 1368, it maintained the right to rule Tibet. The Ming dynasty took over the institutions set up by the Yuan in Tibet and adjusted the administrative apparatus for the Tibetan areas. Carrying out a peaceful policy, the Ming dynasty granted various new offices and titles of honour to officials and dignitaries as well as the influential religious leader in Tibetan areas. These facts demonstrate that the Ming Dynasty had unquestioned sovereignty over Tibet.

The administration over Tibet was further extended when the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) replaced the Ming Dynasty in 1644. In 1792 and 1793, the relationship between China and Tibet was fundamentally reformed. In order to improve Tibet’s administrative organizations, the Qing Dynasty imposed regulations on many occasions to correct and reform the old system and establish a new one.
In 1793, the important royal decree “Twenty-nine Regulations for Better Government in Tibet” was officially published.

According the decree, the Qing government could “hold the power to confirm the reincarnation of all deceased high Living Buddhas of Tibet including the Dalai Lama; moreover every order had to be stamped with the seal of it” (PDO 2008).

From this time on, Tibet was firmly established as China’s vassal. To China belonged not only suzerain rights over Tibet, but sovereign rights as well. This was the law until 1911.

The Qing Dynasty fell during the revolution that commenced in 1911. Shortly afterwards, a group of Tibetans began to rebel against the Chinese. China plunged into chaos. During the years that followed, China was preoccupied by civil war and war against the Japanese. Instability and war in China made the Republican governments unable to assert their rule over Tibet. Many provinces were independent or semi-independent for one time or other. Tibet acted as a de facto independent state, but this independence was not recognized by China. In 1913, the British government took advantage of the political chaos in China after the decline of the Qing Dynasty and forced the new Chinese government to participate in a conference in Simla (India), in which China, Great Britain and Tibet also took part. The Simla negotiations produced a draft convention in 1914 that set the background for the Tibet Question for the next four decades. It was largely in favour of Britain and allowed them control over Tibet’s important issues. The Chinese government refused to sign the agreement, preventing Great Britain from gaining control over Tibet’s affairs. According to the Chinese government statement:

“Tibet forms an integral part of the territory of the Republic of China, that no attempts shall be made by Tibet or by Great Britain to interrupt the continuity of this territorial integrity, and that China’s rights of every description which have existed in consequence of this territorial integrity shall be respected by Tibet and recognized by Great Britain.”

(Harkness J.R., 1995, 16)

The conference broke down without any common settlement. However, since China did not concur with the Simla convention, for Tibet, the “Tibet Question” remained essentially unresolved. Nevertheless, from the decline of the Qing
Dynasty (in Tibet) in 1913, to the death of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933, no Chinese officials were afforded residing in Tibet. China (Kuomintang Government) continued to assert its claim that Tibet was and had always been an integral part of China, but had no impact of the Tibetan affairs. Tibet functioned as a de facto independent nation, providing all governmental functions without influence from China or any other country. Nevertheless, its international status was ambiguous since China continued to claim Tibet as part of its state and the involved Western countries like Great Britain and the United States refused to recognize Tibetan independence.

After a long civil war and the World War II, the Peoples' Republic of China was finally founded on October 1, 1949. The formation of the People's Republic of China ended Tibet's de facto independence. Like the Qing Dynasty and the KMT (Kuomintang Government), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) claimed Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and invaded Tibet's eastern province in October 1950. This invasion was the beginning of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) campaign to integrate Tibet into People’s Republic China. The troops arrived in Lhasa and drove imperialist forces out of the region in 1951. The Central People's Government of China initiated the 17-point-agreement for the peaceful liberation of Tibet that was signed and sealed by the Local Government of Tibet in May of 1951. This was a new chapter in Sino-Tibetan relations.

The seventeen points of the agreement, among other things, recognized that “the Tibetan people shall be united and drive out the imperialist aggressive forces from Tibet; that the people of Tibet shall return to the big family of the motherland, the People's Republic of China” (Richardson 1962). The agreement authorised Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and legitimated the Chinese Government to handle Tibet’s external affairs officially for the first time in Tibetan history. Furthermore, the 17-point-agreement recognized the right of the Dalai Lama's government to continue to administer Tibet and the freedom of religion, at least until the Tibetan people and leaders wanted reforms. China therefore achieved its most momentous goal — Tibetan acceptance of its sovereignty over Tibet and agreement to Tibet becoming part of China.
3.2 Tibet’s view

“At the time of its invasion by troops of the People’s Liberation Army of China in 1949, Tibet was an independent state in fact and law. The military invasion constituted an aggression on a sovereign state and a violation of international law.”

(Tibetan Government-in-Exile, 1993)

For many Tibetans, it is unambiguous that their country has historically been an independent state. The following pages will examine the Tibetan interpretation of history, which has explicitly proven the inexactness of China’s description of history. The view that Tibet became part of China in the thirteenth century is a very recent contention. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese writers generally dated the annexation of Tibet to the eightieth century. They described Tibet’s status under the Qing and nominated it as “feudal dependency”, not an integral part of a country. According to this, Tibet was ruled as such, within the empires of the Mongols and the Manchus. As soon as the Qing dynasty was declined in 1911, Tibet became independent once more (Elliot Sperling).

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the Mongol leader, Genghis Khan, conquered most of Eurasia including China and Tibet. Therefore, Mongolia could also assert claim to both countries. In the middle of the thirteenth century, the Tibetan leaders concluded an agreement with the Mongol rulers, in which they promised political loyalty, religious blessings and teachings in exchange of patronage and protection. The priest-patron relationship began that has been a future of Tibetan political and religious life for centuries. It has existed under a variety of circumstances that bount the Tibetan cleric to both internal and external rulers and powers. The priest-patron relationship was present during periods in which Tibet was subordinate secular power acting as religious patron, as well as during periods in which these powers had no real political authority in Tibet. Such was the case with the dynasty that followed the Yuan, the Ming dynasty, which ruled China from 1368 to 1644 and had few ties to Tibet, but no authority over it. Later, the Qing emperor who succeeded the Ming dynasty in 1652 not only accepted the fifth Dalai Lama as a leader of an independent country, the ruler also treated him as a divinity on Earth.

This priest-patron relationship was the only connection that existed between the Tibetans and Manchus during the Qing dynasty. It did not, in itself, affect
Tibet’s independence. On the political level, some powerful Manchu emperors succeeded in circulating influence over Tibet. Thus, between 1720 and 1792, the Qing ruler sent imperial troops to protect the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people from foreign invasion and internal unrest. Therefore, reorganisation of the Tibetan administration and establishing a loose protectorate was enforced. The Qing emperor’s motives at this time were primarily geo-political. Nevertheless, even at the height of its power in Tibet, the Qing dynasty made no attempt to absorb Tibet into China as a province.

By the mid-nineteenth century, British influence on the Indian subcontinent had extended right to the border of Tibet. British India then tried to establish direct relations with Tibet, however the Tibetan government declined to discuss political matters with them, but allowed them to travel and trade in Tibet. Thereupon, British India turned to China and recognized it as an overlord of Tibet. In 1903, when it became clear that China had no practical control over events in Tibet, London planned to send Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, with an expedition to open negotiations. The Tibetans again refused, so British officers with their Indian troops were sent to persuade Tibet’s government to change their mind. On August 3, 1904, they entered Lhasa, the capital of Tibet.

Throughout this period, the Chinese government urged the Dalai Lama to negotiate with Britain, but he ignored the admission and fled to exile in Mongolia, from where he sought Russian support against Britain. As a result of numerous uprisings in Tibet, the Anglo-Chinese Convention was appointed, which reaffirmed the Chinese overlord position in Tibet and restricted the British role primarily to commercial affairs. In 1907, an Anglo-Russian treaty internationalized it.

From 1911 to 1950, Tibet successfully avoided foreign influence and behaved, in every aspect, as a fully independent country. During World War II, Tibet remained neutral, despite strong pressure from China and its allies. In 1949, Tibet maintained diplomatic, economic, and cultural relationships with all neighbouring countries, most of whom had diplomatic representatives in Lhasa. The turning point in Tibet’s and China’s history came in 1949, with an establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In the same year, the new Chinese communist government proclaimed that Tibet, like Hainan Island and Taiwan, was an integral part of China, and set its liberation as a major goal for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950. That was the beginning of the Tibetan government-in-exile period.
4 Current debate

4.1 Cultural affairs

Since the 1950s, the situation within the dependent region Tibet has remained the same. The Dalai Lama formed a Tibetan government in exile located in India. His agent in China is the 18 year-old Panchen Lama named Gyaincain Norbu, chosen by the Chinese government and not officially accepted by His Holiness as the reincarnation of the former Panchen Lama. Thus, the Tibetan Buddhists are in a state of religious and cultural conflict regarding the official representation of their religious leader in China.

Nowadays, 1.77 million people live in Tibet; about 40% of them are Chinese. This is a result of the population policy of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) within the last 50 years. In the first decade of Tibet’s occupation by the Chinese administration, China built many railway lines from the industrialized coastal areas to Tibetan regions. Especially the northern Tibetan areas like Amdo (Chinese: Qinghai) are affected by this development. For example, Gormo is a northern Tibetan town in the Amdo region with a population of about 200,000 people of which only 1.8% are Tibetans (3,600 people) (DIIR 2008, 8). The population of the Amdo region increased from 1.5 million in 1949 to more than 5 million today. In 2001, the PRC started building a second railroad line between Lhasa and Gormo and from there to the industrialized coastal areas of China.

With regard to this development, the Tibetans are afraid of losing their culture. Due to the government-in-exile situation, it is difficult for them to practice their old traditions.

4.2 International debates

Regarding the current discussion on the China-Tibet-conflict, it is not easy to obtain scientifically proven material. According to this unfortunate situation, we will perform a short media analysis within the following pages. We will take a look at the situation from the perspective of a European observer; thus we will analyze western-oriented articles from the internet.

There are two differing parties regarding this dispute. The first proclaims human rights for Tibet and the intervention of the “western world” into the conflict. The second party is slightly economically-driven and favours a more restrained acting of Europe and the United States.
4.2.1 Human Rights campaigners

„At the end of the year 2007, the overall human rights situation in Tibet remains serious and worse than the previous year“ (TCHRD 2007, 13)

The Tibetan Centre of Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) publishes an annual report regarding the human rights situation in Tibet. Within this paper, the authors bemoan the worsening of the human rights situation in China-ruled Tibet. In 2007, the cases of arbitrary arrest and detentions increased almost threefold in comparison to the previous year. 65 people were arrested in 2007. In fact, 119 persons are known to have been imprisoned as Tibetan political prisoners\(^1\), of which 80 (almost 70%) were monks and nuns. Most of them are incarcerated because of peaceful protests against the Chinese occupation. Their felony was to show the banned Tibetan flag or pictures of the Dalai Lama within non-violent demonstrations.

Religious freedom in Tibet took a major setback in 2007. The Chinese government decreed two new regulations: “Tibet Autonomous Region Implementing Measures for the Regulations on Religious Affairs” and “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism”. The (unofficial) aim of the former is to regulate the affairs of the Tibetan monastic community and to keep the monks under control. The Chinese government describes the latter as “an important move to institutionalize the management of reincarnation”. The Tibetans recognize this regulation as an attempt to undermine their religious hierarchy and a weakening of the religious leaders — including the Dalai Lama. Another decree — issued in September 2007 — demands reincarnated lamas seek permission from the authorities to be reborn. Due to these and other political interventions in religious freedom, violence in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) increased intensely in 2007.

Freedom of expression and opinion is also of great importance in this discussion. Many Tibetan internet sites were closed within the last year because of non-compliance with official Chinese guidelines. Without official permission and a governmental attendant, entering the TAR is prohibited for international press and TV.

\(^1\) This is a really paradox situation, because only citizens of other countries can achieve this status. Though Tibet is a part of China, Tibetan prisoners cannot be political prisoners in China.
Human rights campaigners are looking forward to the Olympic Games in Beijing 2008. They hope for international attention to their problems alongside the pomp, glamour and propaganda.

“TCHRD calls for One World, One Dream...let there be Human Rights in Tibet. Let there be dignity and justice for all in present-day China.” (TCHRD 2007, 10)

4.2.2 Lobbyists

In opposition to the human rights campaigners, another political interest can be recognized in the Chinese-Tibetan dispute. The view of lobbyists is slightly different. This opinion is not an official one. Thus, it cannot be found in official publications, even though it can be noted in the subtext of some papers. For example, the WTO recommends the railway development in China because of its good influence to the Chinese economy (WTO 2006, 9).

The lobbyists in this dispute prefer a restrained acting of the western world because of the importance of China for the world market and international trade. China was third in the official WTO-Trade-Ranking in 2006. In this year, the GDP of China was 2,668,071 million US$. 16% of the total world export comes from China. This is the third after the United States and the European Union (WTO 2008).

China has become an important part of international trade within the last century. The position of the lobbyists is that the conflict between China and Tibet is an internal conflict of the Chinese government. International forces should better stay out of this dispute and wait for an internal solution.

5 Conclusion

The historical status of Tibet as a dependent region of China is a controversially discussed topic.

The Chinese government maintains that China has always had control over Tibet and Tibet has historically always been an integral part of China from the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty in 1271. China lost its control over Tibet during the time of social riots and the change of government in 1911. This was the only time Tibet was a de facto independent state. In May 1951, the 17-point-agreement was signed. It officially recognized the Tibetan acceptance of China’s sovereignty over Tibet.
The Tibetan government-in-exile insists that Tibet has always been an independent country. Historical documents were brought forward as evidence, even though the Tibetan politicians admit that they requested China’s help in the 1720s. During this period, it was — of course apart from the invasion in the 1950s — the only time Tibet was controlled by China.

Nowadays, the cultural situation in Tibet is sophisticated. The religious leader in China is not accepted by the Dalai Lama and his supporters. In the last decades, many Chinese people came to Tibet and, in some regions, Tibetans pose a minority.

When it comes to international debates, we differentiate between two disagreeing western parties in the Chinese-Tibetan conflict: human rights campaigners and lobbyists. The former denounce the outrageous human rights situation in Tibet and require an intervention of Europe and USA. The latter proclaims a reserved attitude of the “western world” to this conflict and points out the importance of China for world market.

As a result of our work, we conclude that the problem is much more complex than it seemed when we started dealing with this topic. The more one tries to understand the roots of the conflict, the clearer it becomes that the problem is unsolvable. To prevent further problems, our recommendation is to start from the beginning. The contributors should leave history behind and try to find new agreements in this matter. Perhaps it would be possible to establish an “Eastern-Asian Union” modelled on the structure of the European Union. Officially both countries would stay independent — without physical, but with geographical frontiers.
References


