

THE SNOW
LION AND
THE DRAGON

China, Tibet, and
the Dalai Lama

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Preface

The Tibet Question, the long-standing conflict over the political status of Tibet in relation to China, is a conflict about nationalism—an emotion-laden debate over whether political units should directly parallel ethnic units. This question pits the right of a “people” (Tibetans) to self-determination and independence against the right of a multiethnic state (the People’s Republic of China) to maintain what it sees as its historic territorial integrity.

Such nationalistic conflicts have no easy answers, for the international community has arrived at no consensus about when a people is justified in demanding self-determination or when a multiethnic state has the right to prevent secession. The current United Nations Charter illustrates the ambiguity. Whereas article 1 (section 2) states that the purpose of the UN is to ensure “friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and *self-determination*,” article 2 (section 7) states that “nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.”¹ Force is often the final arbiter, as when the United States went to war to settle the threat of Confederate secession.²

Although Tibet occupies a remote part of the world, the Tibet Question has captured the imagination and sympathy of many in America and the West and resonates throughout the American political landscape. It has also become a significant irritant in Sino-American relations. But the conflict is not well understood. Typical of nationalistic conflicts, the struggle to

control territory has been matched by a struggle to control the *representations* of history and current events. Both sides (and their foreign supporters) regularly portray events in highly emotional and often disingenuous terms intended to shape international perceptions and win sympathy for their cause. History is a major battlefield, and the facts of the conflict have become obscured by an opaque veneer of political rhetoric. Interested observers are deluged with contradictory claims and countercharges that render a dispassionate and objective assessment of the conflict excruciatingly difficult, even for specialists.

The aim of this book is to peel away the layers of this veneer. In the following pages the anatomy of the Tibet Question will be examined in a balanced fashion using a *realpolitik* framework to focus on the strategies of the actors.

While issues such as cultural survival and population transfer will be discussed, this book does not focus specifically on violations of individual human rights in Tibet, such as abusing prisoners or arresting monks for peaceful political demonstrations. These rights violations exist and are deplorable, but they are not at the heart of the problem. The Tibet Question existed long before there was a People's Republic of China, and it also predates the recent Western interest in universal human rights. In fact, if there were no human rights violations in Tibet and if Tibetans could, for example, practice peaceful political dissent, the Tibet Question would be every bit as contentious as it now is. The Tibet Question is about control of a territory—about who rules it, who lives there, and who decides what goes on there.

We must also clarify the meaning of "Tibet." Ethnic Tibetan populations are distributed over an area as vast as Western Europe. They are found not only in China but also in India (Ladakh, Sikkim, northern Uttar Pradesh, and Arunachal Pradesh), Nepal, and Bhutan. Within China, the 1990 census reported 4.6 million ethnic Tibetans divided between two

major regions—46 percent in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and 54 percent in the west China provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.³ The former area—usually referred to as "political Tibet"—is equivalent to the polity ruled by the Dalai Lamas in modern times; the latter—ethnographic Tibet—corresponds to the borderland areas occupied by various traditional Tibetan native states. Hugh Richardson, the British diplomat who served in Lhasa as an official for the colonial Indian government in the 1930s and 1940s, explained this distinction as follows:

In "political" Tibet the Tibetan government have ruled continuously from the earliest times down to 1951. The region beyond that to the north and east [Amdo and Kham in Tibetan] . . . is its "ethnographic" extension which people of Tibetan race once inhabited exclusively and where they are still in the majority. In that wider area, "political" Tibet exercised jurisdiction only in certain places and at irregular intervals; for the most part, local lay or monastic chiefs were in control of districts of varying size. From the 18th century onwards the region was subject to sporadic Chinese infiltration.⁴

This historical differentiation between ethnographic and political Tibet has become part of the representational battleground of the Tibet Question. For example, because the Tibetan exile government has as one of its main political goals the reunification of all Tibetan areas in China into a single "Greater Tibet," it commonly uses the term "Tibet" to represent events in both ethnographic and political Tibet, fostering the appearance that "Greater Tibet" existed in the recent past. Thus, even though political Tibet was invaded in October 1950, the Tibetan exile government states that Tibet was invaded in 1949, when Chinese forces "liberated" the ethnographic Tibetan areas of Qinghai, Sichuan, and Gansu provinces.⁵ Similarly, to create the impression that Tibet was part of China in the 1930s and 1940s, the Chinese government states that Tibetan delegates participated in Chinese governmental meetings, implying that they

were sent from Lhasa, whereas they were actually from ethnographic Tibet. To avoid such confusion, the term "Tibet" in this book refers to political Tibet unless otherwise indicated.

Documenting a book on a contentious topic like modern Tibet is difficult because much of the key information comes from individuals who request anonymity. Nevertheless, let me broadly describe the sources used in this book.

One important source derives from the Chinese media, e.g., the internal broadcasts included in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) translations. Another source consists of materials issued by Tibetans in exile (or their supporters), for example, the *Tibet Press Watch* of the International Campaign for Tibet or the *World Tibet News*. The reports and documents published by the London-based Tibet Information Service provided a further source of helpful data and analyses.

In addition to these, my own extensive fieldwork in China provided an important database. Over the past twelve years I have conducted research in Tibet on a diverse array of topics, including language, nomads, monasteries, modern history, and rural development; I have spent over two full years in residence there. These research stays permitted firsthand observation of urban and rural life, and, since I speak and read Tibetan, I was able to mix easily with Tibetans from all walks of life without the need for guides or translators. Many Tibetans graciously shared their views and opinions with me, and, although their names do not appear in this book, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to them. Similarly, I owe a great debt to the many officials, scholars, and intellectuals in China, the West, and the Tibetan exile community who also discussed important issues and events with me. Unfortunately, they too must remain nameless. Despite this assistance, in the end responsibility for the views presented in this book are mine and mine alone.

In a different vein, I would be remiss if I did not thank the sponsors of my research—the United States' Committee on

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