Understanding the Tibet Conflict
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Commonly referred to as the roof of the world, few places hold as much mystery and exoticism as Tibet. As recent events have vaulted the Tibetan controversy into the forefront of the international media stage, cries to “Free Tibet!” or those for a unified China have oversimplified the long and complex relationship that has developed between China and Tibet since the 7th century. Western celebrity personalities have sensationalized the Free Tibet movement without also elaborating on the possible economic and social consequences posed by an independent Tibet or an explanation of China’s claim to the region. Conversely, the opaque and uncompromising stance taken by China has not provided the international community with any measure of clarity, likely inhibiting potential support and sympathy.

When discussing the Tibet Question, the question of bias frequently comes into play. Much of the literature published on Tibet depicts the region in one of two lights: either as a backward feudal society suddenly able to attain exceptional economic and social development through the globalizing influence of the Han Chinese, or as a population suffering cultural genocide at the hands of their greedy and domineering neighbors to the East. As with most issues that evoke this magnitude of controversy, the reality of the situation most likely lies somewhere in between the two portrayals. This article will attempt to take no bias, but instead will place the current Tibet-China arguments in a historical context and evaluate the merits of each argument on this basis.

Brief History

Since the much of the present conflict between China and Tibet has been drawn from interpretations of historical power struggles and other interactions between the two regions, it is important to have a basic understanding of their centuries-old relationship. The proceeding paragraphs provide a brief outline of China and Tibet’s shared history.

Although present-day Tibet has clearly not enjoyed the economic growth and development that China has achieved, a review of the Tibet’s early history reveals that the region was once characterized as an influential, economically competitive and assertive kingdom. Tibet emerged from an obscure history to flourish in the 7th century, A.D., as an independent kingdom with its capital at Lhasa. The Chinese first established relations with Tibet during the Tang dynasty (618–906 A.D.), when Tibetan King Songtsän Gampo (604–649 A.D.) united parts of the Yarlung River Valley, which over the centuries was the focus of ancient trade routes from India, China and Central Asia. In 640 A.D. he married Princess Wencheng, the niece of the powerful Chinese Emperor Taizong. The Book of Tang records the initial impressions of the Chinese upon encountering the Tibetans; Chinese writers documented their admiration for the
advanced weaponry and bravery in battle displayed by the Tibetan warriors, and detailing diplomatic relations that continued uninterrupted for centuries.¹

Power shifts continued between the two states as both competed for influence over neighboring territories. Tibetan forces conquered the Tuyuhun Kingdom of modern Qinghai and Gansu to the northeast between 663 and 672 A.D. Until the 9th century, A.D., Tibet also periodically dominated the Tarim Basin and adjoining regions (now China’s Xinjiang province), and created alliances with the Arabs and eastern Turks. Tibet conquered large sections of northern India and even briefly took control of the Chinese capital Chang’an in 763 A.D. during the chaos of the An Shi Rebellion.²

Although military and trade expeditions exposed Tibetans to adherents of many prominent religions, including Christians, Muslims, Taoists, and several other dogmas, Tibet proclaimed Buddhism to be the official state religion in the 8th century. The title and position of the Dalai Lama as the head of Tibet’s theocratic government was established in 1578 when Altan Kahn of the Tumed Mongols, the current ruler of China, conferred the honorific title of Dalai Lama³ on Sönam Gyatso, abbot of the Gelugpa Drepung monastery. This historic event marked a turning point for the Tibetan empire as the introduction of Buddhist monks into Tibet’s government fomented strife and instability between the religious officials and the heads of Tibet’s great noble clans. Subsequent struggles for power led to the disintegration of the Tibetan empire in the 13th century, thus enabling the invading Mongols to impose their influence on the region.⁴ The Mongols were not of Han descent, nor were their territorial conquests confined to the Chinese and Tibetan regions; however, the Mongol occupation of China prior to the Tibetan conquest and the establishment of a capital on Chinese soil introduced the idea of Tibet as a component part of a Chinese empire. China’s contemporary claims that Tibet has long been an “integral part of China” cites this period as evidence to support their rights to the region.

The Pro-Tibet movement rejects China’s claim that Tibet has long been an “integral part of China” based on their evaluation of Chinese influence on and interactions with Tibetans from the Yuan Dynasty to the present. During the period of Mongol occupation Tibet was subject to Mongol rule both politically and militarily; the Yuan government administered the region through a series of measures directing the appointment of Tibetan officials, the creation and implementation of tributes, taxes, and the taking of a census. However, these structures were supplemented by significant roles played by the Tibetans in the region’s day to day administration. It can also be noted that there was a considerable amount of decentralization in quite a few sections of Tibet, especially in the Mongol-controlled areas close to Iran.

The delineations between the Tibetan and Chinese sovereignty became increasingly murky during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) as the Manchu began their tenure as rulers in Beijing. In the subsequent years, the function and authority of the Dalai Lama was in a constant state of flux depending on the individuals filling the role, the current political situation and the stance taken by the Chinese. In the early years of the dynasty Chinese actions indicated that the

¹ Liu Xu, ed., The Book of Tang, 10th century, A.D.
³ “Dalai” is translated to mean “ocean”; the full title translates to “Ocean of Wisdom.”
⁴ During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) the Mongols occupied most of Asia, including China, Tibet, Vietnam, and Korea.
Dalai Lama was perceived more or less as an independent sovereign. These perceptions are exemplified by the reception given to the fifth Dalai Lama by the Qing Emperor, Shunzhi, during a visit to Beijing in 1632. The fifth Dalai Lama’s autobiography details marks of respect that the Chinese officials paid him during this trip, including a personal reception from the emperor upon arrival, which required the emperor to travel over 20 kilometers out of the capital. Although the Qing Historical Records do not give as much detail of this event, they do indicate that “the Tibetan hierarch was given a more important reception than that normally granted to a tributary prince.”

After the death of the fifth Dalai Lama 1682, the authority of the Tibetan government was dramatically eroded through the ineffective and controversial reign of the sixth Dalai Lama and by a Mongol invasion in the early 18th century. When the Chinese ousted the Mongols in 1717 and brought a new Dalai Lama with them, the Tibetans welcomed the Chinese as liberators. This reception prompted the Emperor Kangxi to declare Tibet a protectorate of China - a historical precedent for the Communist takeover nearly 250 years later.

In 1911 a revolution in China toppled the Qing dynasty, compelling the last of the Manchu forces stationed in Tibet to return to China. The 14th Dalai Lama took advantage of China’s distraction and the absence of occupying troops and proclaimed independence for Tibet in 1912. Subsequent international and domestic events, including World War II and the Chinese Civil War, allowed Tibet to successfully avoid undue foreign influence and behave as a fully independent state from 1911 to 1950; during this brief period, the Tibetan government oversaw all affairs of state, economy, infrastructure, religion and culture. Tibet’s autonomy ended shortly after Mao Zedong’s victory over the Nationalists; in October 1950, thousands of CCP troops invaded eastern Tibet and captured the lion’s share of the Tibetan army. The Chinese then forced the government of Tibet to discuss a settlement with China; a Tibetan delegation traveled to Beijing in 1951 and reluctantly signed a "Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet." This document formally acknowledged Chinese sovereignty over Tibet in exchange for Chinese agreement to maintain the Dalai Lama and keep the traditional Tibetan politico-economic system intact. The agreement also provided the Chinese with the opportunity to subsume outlying portions of traditionally ethnic Tibetan territory into several western Chinese provinces. Thus, regions came to be identified as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) while other ethnically Tibetan areas became incorporated into neighboring Chinese provinces. Shortly after the agreement was signed Chinese troops moved peacefully into Lhasa, beginning an occupation of that has continued until the present.

Tibetan bitterness at the loss of their independent status resulted in a chilly and uncooperative reception for the occupying Chinese. Increasing friction amassed between the traditional Tibetan government, Chinese officials in Tibet, and a growing rebel force in the countryside as the Chinese attempted to enforce the terms that had been set in the Seventeen Point Agreement. An unsuccessful Tibetan revolt erupted in March 1959 and the Dalai Lama

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6 Ethnic Tibetan regions encompass the whole of Qinghai province, western parts of Sichuan, areas of Yunnan and a corner of Gansu. This territory roughly amounts to that controlled by the 13th Dalai Lama
and many Tibetans fled into exile; thousands of Tibetans are believed to have been killed during periods of repression and martial law.

After assuming direct rule of Tibet by abolishing the existing government, the Chinese set about reordering society both in Tibet and in China. Known as the Cultural Revolution, developments in Tibet during this period were characterized by policy known as "destroying the four olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits). The Chinese vigorously implemented the policy with the aim of purging all elements of traditional culture and replacing it with a new “homogeneous and atheistic communist culture.”

Private religious activities were expressly prohibited, monasteries were torn down, and the Tibetans were forced to abandon deeply held values and customs that went to the core of their cultural identity, while still being required to maintain their agricultural output. Mandates imposed on the Tibetans by the central government required men to abandon their distinctive hair style of bangs and two braids in favor of a short unisex hairstyle, and women to break the strong cultural taboo against females slaughtering animals. Tibetan protests to maintain their traditional identity clashed violently with the constant torrent of central government propaganda which contradicted and ridiculed their time-honored traditions.

The death of Mao Zedong, the fall of the Gang of Four, and the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping enabled the Chinese to revisit the Tibet Question in the early years of the 1980’s. Representatives from the Chinese government invited the Dalai Lama to send a delegation to travel freely throughout Tibet and observe the developments that had been implemented since their exile. Although the Chinese believed the delegation would no doubt be impressed by the progress made in Tibet since China assumed direct rule in 1959. On the contrary, the delegation returned unsatisfied with the developments; their report included a catalogue of 1.2 million deaths, the destruction of 6,254 monasteries and nunneries, the absorption of a large percentage of Tibetan territory into Chinese provinces, 100,000 Tibetans in labor camps and extensive deforestation of the plateau. Talks negotiating the return of the Dalai Lama—now a prominent international figure—broke down in 1983. Protests and government crackdowns have continued periodically over the last two decades; the Chinese are no closer to reaching an agreement of any kind with the Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile.

Current Developments in the Conflict

Although the Dalai Lama has been an unswerving advocate of nonviolent policy and has never claimed to be seeking independent nation status for Tibet, disputes between the two states have frequently escalated into violent conflict. While Chinese-Tibetan conflicts of this nature have drawn international media attention for decades, the upcoming 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing has pushed the issue into the international spotlight with far more immediacy and intensity than ever before. Less than five months before China hosts the Olympic Games, the recent clashes with pro-Tibet activists threaten to overshadow the Post-Mao era economic and social achievements that the central government had hoped to highlight during this international

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7 Goldstein, 1989
8 Yan, Jiaqi, & Gao, Gao, Turbulent decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution, pages 75-76 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996)
event. Originally planned as peaceful marches intended to observe the 49th anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s flight into exile, the demonstrations that took place in March 2008 rapidly escalated into riotous mobs protesting various economic, social and political grievances endured as a result of Chinese government rule. The magnitude of the international outrage evoked by the controversial methods used by the Chinese to stop the protests have approaches that sparked by the Tiananmen Square incidents.

Among the categorical statements and sensational buzz-words used by both camps, the phrase that has drawn the most reaction has been the accusation that China is guilty of practicing “cultural genocide” against the Tibetan population. In order to better evaluate the motivating factors driving the conflict, it is necessary to define what is meant by the term “cultural genocide.” A generally accepted definition is that it is a process of deliberate destruction of the cultural heritage of a people or nation for political or military reasons. Activists for the pro-Tibet movement argue that the economic and social reforms implemented over the last few decades have systematically destroyed much of traditional Tibetan culture, and that the benefits reaped from economic reforms have disproportionately benefited the Han immigrant population. They further claim that the sheer number of Chinese immigrants into the TAR has placed pressure on ethnic Tibetans to abandon their traditional language and culture in order to attain economic success. Conversely, the Chinese government maintains that their influence over the region has been an overwhelmingly positive one, improving elements of both the Tibetan economic and social structures. Furthermore, the Chinese argue that not only has the average standard of living increased for Tibetans, but that mandates passed by the central government have actually helped to support the continuity of traditional Tibetan culture and religion.

The reality of the current situation most likely lies in between the two sides. In a region that has enjoyed such a long, complex, and generally isolated history, the speed with which economic development has occurred has created an unprecedented paradigm shift of Tibetan societal values and norms. Without concrete knowledge of individual utility measurements and long-term effects of the imposed reforms, it is difficult to categorically draw a line between what is cultural genocide and what is the result of globalization. In an attempt to move beyond the media buzz and explain the difficulty of overcoming the current impasse, the following paragraphs evaluate key factors most often debated in the Tibet conflict and evaluate the effects of Chinese rule on the TAR.

The Religious Aspect

The gold and burgundy robes donned by Tibetan Buddhist monks have become one of the most powerful visuals associated with the Tibet question. As a nation founded by individuals fleeing religious persecution, Americans tend to most identify with the religious aspect of the Tibetans’ struggle. As over 99% of ethnic Tibetans claim to actively practice Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese restrictions on the practice of religion has affected the lives of Tibetans on the a fundamental level.

The Chinese governmental policy has been drastically moderated since the violent oppression of the Cultural Revolution period. According the Xinhua news agency, the Chinese
central government has allocated more than 700 million yuan since 1980 to maintain 1,400 monasteries and cultural relics in Tibet. In addition, the region has more than 1,700 religious sites for Tibetan Buddhism, accommodating 46,000 monks and nuns. Emphasizing their tolerance of a variety of religions, Xinhua also points to government support for four mosques and a Catholic church in the TAR. Dr. Sherab Nyima, the Vice President of China's Central University of Nationalities, emphasized the progress that China has made in the direction of religious freedom in Tibet, saying "In [years past], ...doctrines made religious belief totally compulsory; while nowadays China's legislations ensure complete freedom of religious belief for all individuals."  

Regardless of concessions to freedom of belief, freedom to practice religion in Tibet has continued to be constrained or controlled. Limits on the size of existing monasteries or nunneries are enforced and there are prohibitions against the creation of new religious institutions. In the late 1990s, many monasteries and nunneries that had unilaterally exceeded their limits were forced to send the "excess" monks and nuns back to their families. The government also began to strictly enforce a directive prohibiting males under 18 years of age from becoming monks, despite the Tibetan tradition of boys becoming monks before they reach their teens. These restraints dramatically alter the social dynamics of a population in which religion serves as a key component. In terms of formal practitioners, in 2002, 3.6% of all Tibetan males were monks, and 2.6% of females were nuns. 16.3% of households had one member living as either a monk or nun. These figures would have increased considerably if government quotas on the population of monks and nuns were abolished. In a recently released public statement, the Dalai Lama expressed his disappointment at the continued religious restrictions, saying that “it is common knowledge that Tibetan monasteries, which constitute our principal seats of learning, besides being the repository of Tibetan Buddhist culture, have been severely reduced both in number and in population. In those monasteries that do still exist, serious study of Tibetan Buddhism is no longer allowed; in fact, even admission to these centers of learning is being strictly regulated. In reality, there is no religious freedom in Tibet.”

Finally, one of the most pressing aspects of the religious controversy is the fate of the pro-Tibet movement after the death of the current Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama, presently 73 years of age, has served not only the highest spiritual and political figure for Tibetans, but also as an internationally recognized symbol of the movement. As the mortality of the aging leader becomes an increasingly important issue, China has sought greater influence within the Tibetan religious sphere. Tibetans consider the identification of reincarnate lamas or tulkus to be a religious matter, but the Chinese government has attempted to control the process of identifying high-ranking tulkus with an increasing level of authority; a governmental decree has made it illegal for Tibetan monks to identify tulkus without the approval of Chinese government authorities. If the central government is able to enforce this regulation and use their influence to

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10 Statements from Professor Sherab Nyima, the Vice President of China's Central University of Nationalities, when he met the press at the 1st Beijing Human Rights Forum, April 21, 2008. (People's Daily Online)  
11 Goldstein, Melvyn C., Jiao, Ben, and Beall, Cynthia M. “Development and Change in Rural Tibet: Problems and Adaptations,”  
Asian Survey, (Berkeley, The Regents of the University of California, 2003)  
12 Statement released March 2008  
13 A tulku is considered to be the corporeal existence of reincarnated Buddhist masters
appoint a pro-China Dalai Lama to head the Tibetan government, the opposition movement will effectively be crippled beyond recovery.

The Economic Divide: A Glass Ceiling?

While the economic issues inherent in the conflict have not warranted as many headlines as the religious controversy, spill-over effects from China’s breakneck economic development has had a similarly dramatic impact on ethnic Tibetan culture and quality of life. China’s economic boom and double-digit growth has changed the landscape of Tibet both physically and socially; the once pastoral plateau is now dotted industry and commerce. Although each factory opening has brought both jobs and investment into the TAR, pro-Tibet activists have taken issue with China’s claims that they have had an unequivocally positive influence on the Tibetan community and region as a whole.

Economic reforms of the late 1970’s and 1980’s veered from the agrarian-centric Third Front Strategy and began to concentrate on industrial growth efforts in the coastal provinces at the expense of the agriculturally dominant interior regions. In 1978, the TAR and Qinghai were among the ten provinces with the highest per capita GDP; by 1994 Qinghai had fallen to the middle range and the TAR had the fourth lowest per capita GDP and lowest growth rate. This trend continued into the 21st century, as evidenced by numerous statistics measuring various economic growth indicators. The increase in revenue performance as a percentage of GDP increased only 0.8% between 1995 and 2002, in contrast to 8.3% in Beijing and 5.5% in Shanghai. Social programs were also notoriously underfunded in Tibetan areas; in 2000, illiteracy exceeded 15% of the population (aged 15 and above) in six predominantly rural western provinces (Guizhou, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Tibet, and Yunan) in 2000 but was less than 5% in many of the more urbanized eastern provinces.

In response to the disproportionate lack of economic growth in the interior, in 2000 the central government launched the Western Development Strategy (WDS), a series of policies designed to resolve the regional disparities and fostering economic growth in the interior provinces. Since the implementation of these policy directives, growth in Tibetan areas has claimed some of the highest rates in western China since the mid-1990s, largely through a substantial increase in investment from the Chinese central government. According to figures released by the Chinese state news agency, Xinhua, the Tibet economy has been growing at an annual rate of 12% or more over the past seven years. The per capita net income of farmers and herdsmen posted double-digit growth for the fifth consecutive year and reached 2,788 yuan in 2007. In 2005, the Chinese Government reported that the per capita disposable incomes of urban and rural residents in Tibet averaged 8,411 yuan and 2,075 yuan respectively. These figures were an increase of 30.4% and 55.9% since the year 2000.

Despite ostensibly encouraging developments, pro-Tibet advocates argue that these statistics misrepresent the true distribution of per capita growth among the Tibetan populace. They point out that in contrast to the robust growth in construction and the tertiary sector, official

15 China Finance Yearbook 2003
16 Ibid, 2003
reports imply that development in agriculture and industry has been comparably sluggish, growing at speeds far below the regions nominal GDP growth rates. In fact, the worst performance was recorded in agriculture, by far the main activity of most Tibetans. Agriculture accounted for 72% of employment in the entire province in 2001, or more specifically, about 75% of the Tibetan employment in the province, and almost 90% of rural employment. Given that around 85% of Tibetans live in the rural areas and the rural areas are almost exclusively populated by Tibetans, not Chinese, sluggish agricultural growth would have primarily affected the Tibetans.  

“Forced Assimilation”

Closely tied to the economic debate are the implications of Chinese population movement into Tibet, resulting in a “forced assimilation” of ethnic Tibetans into a Chinese-dominated society. This argument stems from policies implemented by the central government shortly after the Chinese government assumed control of the territory. Tibet became a region targeted for mass immigration as a result of financial incentives offered by the government to Chinese willing to emigrate to the TAR; in 1984 alone more than 100,000 Han Chinese took advantage of the incentives. While motivation for Chinese immigration into Tibet has transitioned from artificially subsidized incentives into a more natural desire to take advantage of emerging market opportunities, pro-Tibet activists argue that the availability of opportunities highly favors the Chinese population.

Tibetans alleged that political prejudices and a dearth of available education and experience has erected a glass, preventing them from taking advantage of the new opportunities. The population of the TAR’s capital, Lhasa, has become dominated by Han Chinese with demographics of secondary towns starting to follow suit. More educated and politically powerful, these individuals have made a significant impact on Tibetan societal structure and have all but monopolized the top tiers of the region’s economy. Reports describe the divisive environment created by this influential population; most Chinese living in minority areas generally live in their own compounds, avoid any non-job-related contact with Tibetans, and make no effort to learn the Tibetan language.

Rural Tibetans have found themselves in unable to successfully compete with the influx of higher-skilled, more experienced Chinese workers and businesses. A self-fulfilling cycle of under-skilled Tibetans earning low incomes has further expanded an already glaring class divide. This segregation is has been clearly illustrated through examination of a cross section of the recent Tibetan labor market; in 2003 roughly 52% of those who worked at off-farm labor engaged in manual labor, whereas only 26% engaged in skilled work, 18% in business, and 4% in government jobs; the different earning capacities of these types of jobs are substantial. As the Western Development Strategy pumps more funds into infrastructural projects in Tibet, the competition from non-Tibetan workers is likely to substantially increase, and Tibet's economy will become increasingly entrenched in the grasp of Chinese firms and laborers.

17 Ibid, 2008
19 Since the late 1950’s, Mandarin Chinese has been the official language of Tibet
Concluding Thoughts

The continuing chaos in Lhasa poses a huge problem for the Chinese government. For a regime that values stability above all else, the defiance of the Pro-Tibet movement has become the ultimate challenge to Chinese legitimacy in the region. On one level, the very public demonstrations shatter the illusion that Tibetans are the delighted recipients of Chinese money and progress. On another, the inability of Chinese security forces to predict and preempt an uprising and their subsequent failure to protect the Chinese inhabitants of Lhasa has resulted in a devastating loss of face for the Chinese. Much to China’s dismay, the demonstrations in Tibet have successfully drawn attention from the country’s impressive economic success and general development that Beijing had wished to highlight.

Issues of ethnic independence are notoriously difficult to navigate and have an impact far beyond the locales involved. Although it is an established fact that most Tibetans have economically profited to some extent as a result of Chinese rule, these gains can not be reconciled with the cultural cost. In situations where emotive factors play a dominant role, "practical" questions—such as the probability that Tibet’s positive development trends could be maintained should the Chinese vacate the region—tend not to hold equal weight. Political pride, fervent loyalty to tradition and the sway of international perception have time and again foiled attempts to pragmatically resolve disputes for centuries.

The recent events have reinforced the inability of either side to move towards a mutually acceptable compromise— or even to engage in formal discussion. Recently, the Dalai Lama issued an especially strong statement, calling for an international inquiry into China's crackdown in the protests, accusing China of employing a "rule of terror" in the TAR and employing cultural genocide. This kind of inflammatory rhetoric only serves to isolate the Chinese government and further ensure that a resolution will not be reached at any point in the near future. Mao Zedong has been quoted as saying that the Chinese Communist Party should continually strive “to accept what is useful and healthy, and to discard what is not.” These words should serve as a guide for both the Chinese and the Tibetan leadership as they weave through the minefield of middle ground in pursuit of a compromise.