

Internal Conflict in Tibet (China)

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Introduction

“For centuries, Tibet and China have maintained relations of mutual influence, until Beijing imposed on the Tibetan population a domination which could be compared to the colonial way.”[1] Nowadays, Tibet is considered as a province belonging to the People’s Republic of China. However, the Dalai Lama, spiritual figure for the Tibetan people, is still asking to the Beijing government for the autonomy of the region. This phenomenon is the result of a long historical, cultural, and political evolution. In a first part, this paper will introduce the geographic space of the Tibet region, then in a second, it will introduce the history of this complex area, finally this paper will go deeper into the topic to analyse the internal conflict’s development that shakes Tibet and China.

The internal conflict studied is located in Central Asia, more precisely in the heart of the highest mountain range of the world called Himalaya. This space which contains the Tibetan cultural area is really vast with three million five hundred thousand km². More precisely, between two separated worlds, on one side the Indian world and on the other the Chinese world, there is a hinge which is the Tibet. On this historical cultural space comes the politics of States. Indeed, we can find all along the Himalaya the Afghanistan, Pakistan, Northern India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Burma. Then, on the other side of the watershed, in the north of Himalaya, there is China, also considered as a part of the Historic Tibet since the annexation by Chinese in 1950¹. In fact, after invading Tibet with the Chinese Red Army, Beijing divided the Tibetan geographical space into several administrative entities, which are today provinces of China. As a result, those are located in the north of Himalaya, the Northeast became the Qinghai Province, in Central East there is the Sichuan Province, and the South East is attached to the Yunnan Province. Finally, what remains became in 1965 the Tibet autonomous region.² This latter is bordered in the south of Himalaya by Northern Nepal, Indian provinces called Sikkim and Ladakh and the little kingdom of Bhutan. In the East, there are the chains of Pamir and Karakoram, and in the North the Kunlun Mountains. [2] The altitude’s average of the region is five thousand meters, and the whole surface area of the Tibet autonomous region is about one million two hundred thousand km².

Moreover, the total Tibetan population is about 8.5 million. Tibetans who live in China, mainly in the Tibet Autonomous Region, the Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces are about 6,3 million. Other Tibetan are thus living outside China, in native Tibetan communities such as in India, in Nepal, Bhutan or also Pakistan.

In the Tibet autonomous region alone, the Tibetan ethnic majority is populated with about 2,7 million of inhabitants, or 91 per cent of the total population.³ Most of the Tibetan people are living in the Brahmaputra river valley in the Tibet autonomous region, also called the Rood of the World, where the living and climate conditions are a little more propitious. This is also where there is Lhasa, capital of Tibet. Finally, Tibetan and Mandarin are the official languages of this region.[2]

Consequently, Tibetan have shaped an original civilization which is able to live in a really sensitive region of the world. To survive, they raise the yak and grow barley in difficult conditions. Indeed, the Tibetan plateau is unwelcoming, though the landscapes are breathtaking, and Tibet remains a poor region. However, this people have last for centuries and the question which can be raised today is why did the Chinese annex this region? What was the logic of Beijing?

Many reasons could be seen as motivations for China to invade Tibet. First, economically, because Tibet has a rich subsoil where there is oil, coal, iron etc. Chinese have already developed some mines in the Qinghai region for example. Besides, Tibet is one of the richest region regarding waters. Indeed, most of the Asian great rivers are taking their source in the eastern part of Tibet. Then, Chinese could control them, like the Yellow river, the Yangtze Kiang, the Mekong or also the Salouen and Irrawaddy. As a matter of fact, those

[1] Frédéric Bobin, 23 March 2008

¹ See map 1) Overview of the Tibetan cultural area in Central Asia, p.11

² See map 2) Tibetan Provinces of the People’s Republic of China and the Historic ethnic Tibet, p.11

[2] Jean-Christophe Victor, 1995

³ The Hans represent about 8% of the Tibet autonomous region and what left is ethnic minorities such as Monba (0.3%), Hui (0.3%), Deng, Sherpa and others (0.2%).

[2] Jean-Christophe Victor, 1995

sources could lead to strategic motivations. Indeed, the control on sources could be a tool of pressure over the neighbouring countries. In addition to this idea, the rise of the Tibetan plateau would make it easy to deploy intermediate-range of missiles and in this regard directly threaten the neighbours, especially India which is in tension with China. The military control of this region would be a major asset. Yet, the Tibetan topography makes this wealth difficult to exploit. Actually, those motivations are not enough relevant within the conflict that we observe today, in fact the main concerns are more about history, religion and culture.[2]

First of all, the history and the different views on whether Tibet has historically been an independent nation represent an essential cause of the internal conflict still happening nowadays. During Tibet's early history, it was an independent state and often a great empire, but from the 13th century, when it submitted to Mongol rule, until modern times, Tibet has endured long periods of either Chinese control, influence, or effective autonomy.[3]

Before this time, between the seventh and the ninth centuries, Tibetan power appeared with Songtsen Gampo who was the first great king and unifier of Tibet. During his reign, Tibet saw several evolutions such as the creation of an efficient state administration, with Lhasa as the capital, or also the enlargement of the kingdom's borders. Yet, the main evolution was the writing system. Indeed, borrowed from the Sanskrit system in India, the writing predisposed the nascent Tibetan civilization to be widespread in Indian literature, thought and religion. It was a first step guided to Indian influence instead of the Chinese one. Then, under the reign of King Tri Relpatchen, the main impact on Tibetan culture was the religion. In fact, at this time, Buddhism is declared as the official religion. It will be during the eleventh century that many important monasteries will become the main places for the Tibetan social and cultural life. [4] Consequently, Buddhism, as the second borrowing from India, is major in the shaping of the Tibetan personality because it shows that Tibet is more to belong to Indian civilization than to China.

Therefore, the kingdom is independent until the middle of the ninth century. Comes the Mongolian period which will be maintained in the region with intervals from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. During this time, Genghis Khan and his successors submitted the region of Tibet. Besides, Altan Khan, a Mongolian chief of the sixteenth century, appointed a spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.⁴ As the Mongols conquered Northern China after submitting Tibet, this is the argument that China uses today to explain that Tibet is under its sovereignty. Moreover, when the Manchu, an Asian people, came to power in China during the seventeenth century, emperors who reigned over China adopted for themselves the religion of Tibetans, the lamaic Buddhism, in order to get closer to the Mongols to spread their central power in China, including Tibet. In fact, the Manchu had landed an expeditionary force and installed a protectorate in Tibet until the beginning of the 20th century. They also have founded the Qing dynasty which last for three centuries over China until Sun Yatsen proclaimed the Republic in 1911. This date marks the end of the Manchus.

As a result, began for Tibet a period of inner freedom at that time since outside the game of the great powers, Russia, England and China, is elsewhere politically and militarily. Indeed, the fate of Tibet is no longer played in Lhasa because the kings of the British Indies are wary of Russian influences in Central Asia and Tibet is perceived as a buffer zone between several ambitions. [2]

The situation changed drastically from 1949, when Mao Zedong and the communists came to power in Beijing and proclaimed the People's Republic of China. [3] At that time, China feared that Tibet would fall under the influence of India, not only culturally and religiously but politically as well, after the English influenced the region. Consequently, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched an invasion of Tibet in 1950. From Tibet's perspective, this invasion, led by a military intervention, interrupted centuries of independent nationhood, while the Chinese believed they had reestablished control over a part of their sovereign territory. [5] As a consequence, in Beijing, the fourteenth Dalai Lama's Tibetan representatives had to sign in 1959 the first Sino-Tibetan negotiation connected to the conflict, called "The 17 Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet". This latter acknowledged the legitimacy of the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet and provided the maintenance of a regional autonomy as well as the maintenance of the Tibetan government. However, according to the professor and president of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile, Samdhong Rinpoche, the efforts made by Tibetan as part of the agreement, in order to cooperate with Chinese failed. As a consequence, the context of the 1950s led to a Tibetan uprising in 1959 that Chinese army subdued. As a result, the Dalai Lama and about a

[2] Jean-Christophe Victor, 1995

[3] BBC News, Special Report « Inside Tibet »

[4] Jean Dif, « Histoire du Tibet »

⁴ In Mongol, Dalai Lama means Ocean of Wisdom.

[2] Jean-Christophe Victor, 1995

[3] BBC News, Special Report « Inside Tibet »

[5] Dustin Stokes, March 2010

hundred thousand Tibetan fled to India, in the city of Dharamshala, and the Tibetan government was dissolved.⁵ Those events led six years later to the creation of the Tibet autonomous region. [6]

Between 1959 and 1970, this was probably the darkest time for Tibet. According to Tseten Samdup, a representative of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in Exile for Central and Eastern Europe and the head of the Tibet Bureau in Geneva: "The exiled Tibetan government [...] revealed in 1984 that since the invasion over 1.2 million Tibetans died as a result of China's invasion of their nation. This figure was compiled after years of analysis of documents, refugee statements and interviews, and by official delegations sent to Tibet by the Tibetan Government between 1979 and 1983". [7] Even though those numbers are still refuted by Chinese today, it has to be considered because a harsh violence was truly present. Another important event of the conflict during the twentieth century, which proves the violent means used by Chinese over Tibet to impose their rules, happened on March 5, 1989. Indeed, there was a Tibetan revolt during which many monks, nuns and other Tibetan people from Lhasa met on the step of the famous monastery of Jokhang. Chinese policemen fired the crowd and any kind of means to attack the Tibetan rioters were used. At the end, Beijing introduced a martial law in Lhasa to prevent any revolt and attempt of resistance from the Tibetan, by imposing, among other rules, a curfew. [5] It can be stated that the second half of the twentieth century was severely tumultuous for the Tibetan people. According to Samdhong Rinpoche, this people suffered torture and a cultural genocide which is still continuing today. [6]

In order to explain Chinese annexation of Tibet, it appears that Chinese aimed for erasing Tibetan culture and Indian influences it contains. In fact, what Tibet is facing today is a policy of Sinification⁶ coming from China.

Sinification of Tibet is characterized by the transformation of the Tibetan society and the region, on the basis of Chinese norms. With this in mind, inhabitants from the People's Republic of China are spreading their civilization and their culture by means of a strong cultural assimilation, large movements of the Han population, from China to Tibet, and a policy of reform and adoption of the market economy, aiming for integrating Tibet in the Chinese Republic. [8] In order to make the Tibet region more attractive to Chinese immigrants, the government of Beijing develops crops of wheat and rice for example. On top of that, it is establishing a massive tourism industry with hotels, restaurants held by Chinese. The result of this sinicization leads to a process of Chinese acculturation. The main means is undoubtedly the transfer of population. Indeed, this massive flow of Chinese immigrants consists for the Beijing government in the idea to assimilate Tibetan people. [2] In September 1987, the Dalai Lama affirmed during a commission at the American Congress that "7.5 million Chinese have already settled in Tibet, which is more than the number of Tibetans. They must leave". In fact, according to the Dalai Lama, autonomy means that there must be a higher number of Tibetan, and that if Hans Chinese, the China's major ethnic group, are settling in Tibet, they must adopt the Tibetan language and their culture. [9]

However, the situation is still in the hands of China because since a few decades, the number of Chinese is increasing more and more and no end was put in order to stop the policy of sinicization. Consequently, politically, repression continues, with camps, tortures, especially against the monks who represent the heart of Tibetan culture. Many Tibetan refugees have fled to India and other Tibet's neighbouring countries. [2]

This context led to another important uprising. On March 14, 2008, Tibetan broke out in widespread protests all over the Tibet Autonomous Region as well as in other provinces where some Tibetan are still living in. This phenomenon did not take long to turn into riots. To face such a resistance against the Chinese power coming from Tibetan people who are deeply religious and peaceful, the Chinese government answered by an extreme violence. China denied such facts, preoccupied by this revolt not a long time before the Olympic Games, and affirmed that its army opened fire on people demonstrating, monks, and showed on TV only images of Tibetan demonstrating and putting fire to Chinese stores. In this regard, the repression is hidden by images of

⁵ Later during the same year, the Central Tibetan Administration, also called the Tibetan Government in Exile, will be created by the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso.

[6] 17th Oct. 2000, Audition of Professor Samdhong Rinpoche

[7] Tseten Samdup, 1993

[5] Dustin Stokes, March 2010

[6] 17th Oct. 2000, Audition of Professor Samdhong Rinpoche

⁶ According to the definition of the "Encyclopédie Universalis": make something Chinese, sinicize.

[8] Astrid Fossier, January 2004

[2] Jean-Christophe Victor, 1995

[9] Jean-Paul Desimpelaere, February 2012

[2] Jean-Christophe Victor, 1995

propaganda. China established a number of ten dead people, while the Tibetan government in exile estimated the number to more than a hundred, among them mainly Tibetan killed, and seven religious women shot. [10]

Therefore, two ideologies among both main contenders, China and Tibet, are confronted. Tibetan however can be divided into those who want to remain part of China with an increased autonomy, and those, more extreme, who believe Tibet should be an independent country. Regarding a complex context, it was complicated for the third states to take part on one side of the conflict. In fact, facing either China or Tibet, the majority of the countries of the world did not get really involved. On one side, it was to not go against China to not loose economic interests and dialogue on the international scene with it, on the other side, Tibet kept isolated from international affairs for years during the twentieth century.⁷ As a consequence, no third parties played a consistent and active role in mediating the conflict. Nowadays the situation has changed, third parties have been discussed as an essential part of any solution to the violent discriminations against Tibetan happening through the conflict. [5] In March 2008, to support Tibet still asking for its autonomy, the international community asked China to act with a certain restraint. [10] Moreover, the clashes of 2008 between anti-Chinese protesters and the authorities in Tibet, resulted abroad in a wide publicity. Indeed, the torch relayed in cities like London, Paris and San Francisco and there were pro-Tibet demonstrations, protests and stunts. [11] This phenomenon of supporting Tibet outside the borders has increased since 2011, after Tibetans have immolated themselves on fire. More than one hundred killed themselves in this way between 2009 and 2013 as a sign of protest against Chinese policy and Han domination. [12] Regarding those tragic events, more and more European people demonstrated to support the Tibetan people. It is also due to the fact that Buddhism gets a particular influence in the European continent. Consequently, many political representatives decided to meet the Dalai Lama or its representatives to speak about the current situation of the conflict.⁸ On May 24, 2012, the US State Department published a report on human rights in the world in 2011, in which it reviewed all the daily violations in Tibet. It revealed discriminations, interference to freedom of movement, arbitrary detentions, torture or disappearance. This study indicated that Tibetans knew a series of "increasingly intense and formalized" controls, leading some to self-immolation. Following that, Beijing denied any guilt, accusing foreigners of "destabilizing" the region and claiming that "Tibet is experiencing continuous economic and social development" according to Wall Street Journal. [6]

As a matter of fact, Chinese people are still immigrating to Tibet and the Chinese government claims that thanks to its policy of sinicization, there has been a noteworthy improve of the Tibet region. In fact, Chinese consider that the standard of living in Tibet have been successfully raised through a large improvement of the economy, by means of the tourist industry, as well as the development of means of communication etc. For example, China claimed that "the \$45.4 billion it has spent in the Tibet autonomous region has helped make the region's 2003 GDP 28-times greater than its 1978 GDP." [13]

It can easily be affirmed that issues Tibetan are going through within the conflict are mainly because of the will of an economic growth from the Chinese all over the region. Chinese government considers that the political freedom is less necessary facing such a relevant development. Furthermore, considering the means of Chinese deployed in order to "modernize" such a sensitive region, it led to environmental disasters.⁹ What also raises the wary and frustration of Tibetans is that the Chinese immigration is undermining their political, religious and cultural freedom. Indeed, it is often that Tibetans regard the Chinese government's "modernization" policies as a hurt of their region. In addition to those significant issues, the question often raised is "who this major economic improvement of the region is benefiting to?". Actually, the benefits are going to the Han Chinese who, as immigrants to Tibet, have deployed some industries of tourism for example. This tremendous movement of immigration is thus largely encouraged by the Chinese government through incentive taxes in order to avoid any more claim for autonomy from Tibetans. [5]

[10] France 3, 15 March 2008

⁷ For example, even though the United States of America acted during the 1950s and the 1960s when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) tried to destabilize the new Communist China, it lost interest in this role and the international community was unable to put together a cohesive policy in the region.

[5] Dustin Stokes, March 2010

[10] France 3, 15 March 2008

[11] BBC news, 16 August 2017

[12] Geolinks, 15 June 2015

[6] 17th Oct. 2000, Audition of Professor Samdhong Rinpoche

[13] Aymeric Janier, 29.May 2012

⁹ Example of the construction plan of several river dams in the Brahmaputra valley in 2013, in addition to the mines of lithium exploitation, a massive resource in Tibet: concerning issues for the region. [14] [12]

[5] Dustin Stokes, March 2010

All things considered, the conflict opposing China and Tibet can be seen as an ethnic and religious one. Indeed, the prominence of ethnicity and religion in the conflict is obvious with a majority of Han Chinese ethnic group coming to invade Tibetan civilization who is mainly Buddhist. On top of that, the Chinese government has a past of persecuting religious movements, especially those which could become political movements that could possibly threaten the regime. Even though the ideology of the conflict can be set as religious and ethnic, it is without doubts that, in the first place, the primary sources of this internal conflict were historical and geographic. [2] Anyhow, tensions still in place nowadays, the sociologist and professor Ji Zhe explained in September 2017 that the Chinese Communist Party uses religion as a "soft power" to spread its policy. Especially Buddhism, which is really well perceived in the Western World. Indeed, this latter sees Tibet, especially through the Dalai Lama's wisdom, as a beautiful region and is willing to preserve its original culture and unique civilization. [15] Moreover, despite improvements brought by Chinese progress, Tibet is a people which believes in different values, guided by Buddhism principles and concepts. Then, Tibetan and Chinese are showing along this study two drastically different ways of thinking a society. This approach might lead to the impossibility of finding an agreement to live in peace if they do not find a way to communicate. Therefore, it appears that foreseeing an outcome for the internal conflict in Tibet is a complex issue. However, as a possible outcome of the conflict, it could be established that in a couple of years, Tibet would be more autonomous, but still remaining part of China and under its sovereignty. Yet, Tibet could have more political self-determination. Economic growth put in place by Chinese would continue in a way that benefits also to Tibetans, rather than only Tibet's Han Chinese immigrants. Regarding the Tibetan culture, there is hope for it to remain as long as the movement of Chinese population is regulated. It can also be expected that the amelioration of the situation goes outside the borders of the autonomous region and impacts the neighbouring provinces and other parts that host Tibetan people. However, it is impossible to foresee the setting up of a democracy in People's Republic of China as this latter is a multinational state.¹⁰

As democracy represents by its own definition "the voice of the people", the fact that there are different kind of nations within China makes this phenomenon impossible. What can be expected as well to put those hypothesis into place is a reconciliation. In order to reach this purpose, first thing first, both parties would have to establish an efficient dialogue, within they listen to each other and set solutions fitting with their will. Toward this purpose, the idea of a third party to the conflict would probably be needed as a mediator. What aims to look at the Dalai Lama's major role. As it has previously been underlined, the international community did not really take a stance on the independence question of Tibet and did not take position. Nonetheless, the Dalai Lama, still asking for the autonomy of the region, is largely supported by citizens from around the world; the role of the Dalai Lama is thus truly important for the future of Tibet¹¹. He is a central major figure for the Tibetan people and is part of any peace building process in the region. His influence on China is hard to expect though because of a lack of trust from the Chinese government which in this regard steps backward for cooperation. Besides, countries having an international office get closer to the Tibetan issue. Considering this, and the discriminations still happening against Tibetan population, it can be expected that there will be actions more efficient internationally, like acknowledging the Tibet region. [5] Taking everything into account, no real convincing solution can be set today, but through an overview of the global context in the future, countries which refuse to witness the extinction of the Tibetan culture and its civilization will hopefully try to establish the dialogue on this topic with China. Nevertheless, this latter is more and more economically developed, as well as on the international scene, consequently it is still remaining an unfortunate issue.

[2] Jean-Christophe Victor, 1995

[15] François Bongon, 9 September 2017

¹⁰ Many ethnic groups compose China: Han Chinese who are the majority, the Uyghurs, the Zhuang people, the Yi people, the Hui people etc.

¹¹ In September 2016, the Dalai Lama visited France to speak about several matters such as environment with lawyers, the good felt through meditation and Buddhism with scientists etc. Political issues were out of the picture. The DL gave this power to his first minister and until now no official meetings is planned in order for France to not displease Beijing. Yet, the influence and the presence of the DL was internationally noticed and appreciated by European. [16]

[5] Dustin Stokes, March 2010

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