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TIBET'S ROLE IN INNER ASIA

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- No. 1 Denis Sinor, What is Inner Asia? (1975)
No. 2 Turrell V. Wylie, Tibet's Role in Inner Asia (1975)

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Tibet is often called a terra incognita — a term indicative of widespread ignorance about Tibet and the important role it played in the history of Inner Asia. Before the seventh century A.D., the Tibetan people were illiterate and all but ignored in the archives of their civilized neighbors. Military expansion, particularly against China, gained Tibet a place for the first time in the history of the T'ang Dynasty (618-906). Also, a script was devised in the seventh century and the Tibetans soon began to write their own history.

For centuries the formidable terrain of Tibet isolated its people from the main streams of economic and political intercourse in Asia, but it did not deter the eighth-century introduction and subsequent spread of Buddhism in the "Land of Snows". The importance of Tibet in Inner Asian developments in the second millennium A.D was due largely to the charismatic influence of Tibetan lamas on their lay followers, particularly the Mongols.

The "Shangri-La" image of mysterious Tibet was shattered by the revolt against the Chinese in 1959. Since then Tibet has acquired a new significance in Asia because of its stra-

tegitic location. The publication of many scholarly works since the revolt (combined with earlier works) has shed considerable light on that once "unknown land".

Some interesting features of Tibetan political and religious history are highlighted in this Guide, along with some comments on the formative relationships Tibet had with her neighbors. A selective bibliography with notes on those works recommended for teaching purposes is given at the end.

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I. THE TIBETAN PEOPLE

The Tibetan people are ethnologically distinct. They exhibit two cephalic types. One resembles the "round-headed" south Chinese; the other, the "long-headed" Turco-Mongols of Central Asia. This dichotomy suggests that one was imposed upon the other in prehistoric times, perhaps as the result of military invasion by the "long-heads" against the sedentary "round-heads". The long-head type predominated among the nomads; the round-head type among the agriculturalists.

The Tibetan language itself exhibits an apparent dichotomy of linguistic origin. Tibetan is usually classified in the Sino-Tibetan language family; however, Tibetan and Chinese are mutually unintelligible. Moreover, the syntactical features of Tibetan differ from those of Chinese and mirror those of Mongolian and Japanese, which belong to the Altaic family of languages. Since the Tibetans had no written language before the seventh century, it is not possible to trace the prehistoric origin of these linguistic differences.

One of the first problems to be dealt with in the teaching of Tibetan history and culture is the transliteration of Tibetan names. The spelling of Tibetan was standardized a thousand years ago, and since the written word as a medium for the transmission of the teachings of the Buddha acquired

a sacral character, the orthography became inviolable. Nevertheless, phonological change occurred in the spoken language and today there is disparity between the orthography and pronunciation of many words, particularly in the Lhasa dialect which served as the lingua franca of modern Tibet. As examples: Bkra-shis-lhun-po [name of the Panchen Lama's monastery] appears as Tashilumpo in some sources. Rgyal-rtse [a key administrative town] is commonly spelled Gyantse, and since the annexation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China it is also called Chiang-tzu. Again, unless knowledgeable in the Tibetan language, few people would recognize g.yag [name of a domesticated ox] to be the same as the anglicized 'yak'.^{*}

Faced with this dilemma, some publications aimed at the "general reader" give Tibetan names phonetically; those intended for "scholars" give them orthographically; and others

* Incidentally, 'yak' (g.yag) in Tibetan refers only to the male of the species; the female is called 'dri' ('bri). Thus, the popular term "yak-butter tea" is a biological impossibility.

for the "serious student" provide both spellings (see the bibliographic notes). In view of dialectal variations proper orthography is essential for correct identifications.

II. THE PREHISTORIC PERIOD

Late Tibetan literature contains legendary accounts of the origin of the people and a lineage of prehistoric kings. Tradition claims the Tibetans are descended from monkeys and that they were ruled by divine kings who came down from the sky by means of a magic rope. The eighth king — possessed by an evil spirit — accidentally cut that rope and thereafter the kings were earthbound and entombed at death.

Evidence indicates the oldest religion in Tibet was a form of Central Asian shamanism which taught the world was divided into three realms: sky, earth, and underworld. Each realm was inhabited by certain classes of gods or demons. The soul of a warrior slain in battle went to the sky, while those who died of disease [always demonic in origin] went to the underworld. Many of the ancient shamanic beliefs were adopted into Tibetan Buddhism and survive to this day.

Social development in ancient Tibet appears to fit a traditional pattern. Military conquest of a sedentary population resulted in the establishment of a ruling class, which in turn provided cavalry to protect its acquired proprietary rights and to control the subjugated agriculturalists. The emergence of a charismatic leader and the unification of powerful clans were the initial steps in the formation of a monarchy. The earliest site of the royal court was in the Yar-lung valley region, and two ancient castles (one long since in ruins), as well as the tombs of some of the kings, are found in that area.

III. THE MONARCHY

During the reign of king Srong-btsan-sgam-po (died A.D. 649), Tibet emerged in recorded history as an expanding, militant monarchy, encroaching on the advanced civilizations of India and China. With the creation of a script patterned after an Indo-European syllabary, the Tibetans became literate. Military exploits led to matrimonial alliances; consequently, two Buddhist princesses -- one from Nepal and one from China -- came to Tibet bringing icons. The king had temples built to house their images and the first seeds of Buddhism were sown in hostile shamanic ground.

The active introduction of Buddhism took place in the eighth century during the time of king Khri-srong-lde-btsan (reigned 755-97). Meditation masters came from China, and learned teachers were invited from India to proselytize. The first monastery, named Bsam-yas, was built and Tibetans began to take ordination as monks. Differences between the Chinese and Indian schools led to a formal debate at Bsam-yas. The Chinese debater lost, and the king issued a decree that only the Indian system was to be promulgated in Tibet.

Although a foreign religion, Buddhism may well have been viewed by the Tibetan monarch as a political tool for reshaping the social order and world-view of a shamanic society. Relevant here was the Tibetan acceptance of the Indian system which emphasized morality and social conformity as a means to obtain a better 'rebirth', while the rejected meditational school of Chinese Buddhism is said to have encouraged anti-social and immoral practices during T'ang times.

Politically, the last half of the eighth century saw the Tibetan monarchy expand to its zenith. The capital of T'ang China was captured for a fortnight in 763; and in 790 the Tibetans reconquered Chinese Turkestan, which they had earlier held for two decades (670-92).

Peace with China was formalized by the Treaty of 821-822, negotiated in part by the Tibetan chief minister, a Buddhist monk. The rapid rise of an ecclesiastic to high office was due to the fanatic patronage of Buddhism by king Ral-pa-can (reigned 815-838). This king was the first to implement a tax to support the increasing community of monks. Such premature measures were not welcomed by the majority of the feudal lords who derived their power from a population still dominated by shamanic beliefs and demonic fears.

The conflict of economic-political interests between the pro-Buddhist monarch and a pro-shamanist council of feudal lords was resolved in a violent fashion. The chief minister was falsely accused of adultery with the queen and assassinated. The queen committed suicide. King Ral-pa-can was then assassinated and the throne given to his brother, Glang-dar-ma, who is infamous in Tibetan religious history for a violent persecution of Buddhism. This king in turn was assassinated in 842 by a Buddhist monk.

Lacking an uncontested heir to the throne, the royal lineage split and in time only three small kingdoms remained as vestigial memorabilia of the once great empire. The empire had depended on feudatory loyalty paid to a singular succession of charismatic kings and once that focus was lost the military

unity necessary to the continuity of the empire faded and the empire collapsed — never to rise again. Tibet became fragmented by local hegemons, and remained without a centralized form of government until the thirteen century.

IV. THE MIDDLE AGES

Early in the thirteenth century the Mongols led by Činggis Qayan began the conquest of Asia. In 1240 a Mongol expedition marched to central Tibet putting the torch to two monasteries and killing hundreds of monks. This reconnaissance probe found no organized military force in Tibet that could interfere with their campaigns against Sung China and the Mongols soon withdrew.

Seven years later Sa-skya Pandita, a lama of the Sa-skya ruling family, was invested [in name only] with temporal authority over Tibet in behalf of the Mongols by Čöden Qan, a grandson of Činggis. In 1253 Qubilai Qan entered into the "patron-lama" (yon-mchod) relationship with 'Phags-pa Lama, a nephew of Sa-skya Pandita. The obligation of the "patron" was to provide the military power to enforce the "lama's" prerogatives for which he, in turn, received religious instruction and grace. Over ensuing

centuries the "patron-lama" relationship was to become a basic feature in the evolution of theocracy in Tibet.

Not long after Qubilai became Qayan of the Mongols in 1260, the symbolic investiture of Sa-skya Pandita with temporal power made earlier was implemented in fact by means of Mongol cavalry, and 'Phags-pa Lama became the first Tibetan ecclesiastic to wield political authority in Tibet. This marked the embryonic stage of theocratic rule in Tibet — albeit one depended upon a foreign source of military power for viability.

Under the Sa-skya regency, Tibet was divided into thirteen myriarchies with the powerful proprietary lord or lama in each appointed as an administrator subject to Sa-skya, and hence to Mongol, control.

When Mongol power in China began to decline in the fourteenth century, Ta'i Si-tu, a lama and the myriarch of Phag-mo-gru, overthrew the Sa-skya regency and established a centralized Tibetan government free of foreign domination. He abolished the myriarchy as an administrative unit and divided the state into various smaller units called rdzong. Each rdzong was administered by an official directly appointed for a limited period of time by the Phag-mo-gru government, which had its headquarters in Dbus, the easterly province of central Tibet.

Once the personal charisma of the successive rulers of the Phag-mo-gru dynasty began to wane, an administrator of the Rin-spungs risong revolted in the fifteenth century and established a lay kingdom in Gtsang, the westerly province of central Tibet. By the turn of the seventeenth century the lay rulers of Gtsang, who patronized the Red-hat Karma-pa sect, fought to gain political control of the province of Dbus, then dominated largely by the reformed Yellow-hat Dge-lugs-pa sect.

During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1643), high lamas were invited to court to receive titles and lavish rewards; but there was no "national relationship" between Tibet and China. Interaction between the two countries was limited to local contiguous regions. Politically the important connection was between the Tibetans and the Mongols, who continued to be active in Inner Asia even after they were driven out of China in 1368.

V. RETURN OF THE MONGOLS

Sectarianism, generated in part by reformation, began to develop in Tibetan Buddhism already in the eleventh century. By

the time the Mongols imposed the Sa-skya regency on Tibet sectarian and economic power was transmitted within 1) a community of monks led by an elected abbot; 2) a family from father to son; or 3) a family line from celibate uncle to nephew. The second method (with exceptions) was followed by the Sa-skya regency; the third by the Phag-mo-gru dynasty that replaced it.

In the fourteenth century the unprecedented concept of the "reincarnation of a lama" surfaced in the Black-hat Karma-pa sect [which had no connection with a powerful proprietary family], and by the sixteenth century, the concept was widespread among other sects. This concept provided yet another means for the transmission of sectarian power, i.e., from one "rebirth" to another of the same lama. Once a sectarian group acquired political power, charisma of office began to replace that of person and a 'church' as an 'institution' began to transcend the cult. The innovative method of "reincarnation" for transmission of power was to become fundamental to an institutionalized church.

The last reformation movement in Tibetan Buddhism was led by Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419) and resulted in the Yellow-hat Dge-lugs-pa sect, which reemphasized monastic discipline and celi-

bacy. The reformation was aimed at the moral laxity and pre-occupation with worldly possessions then widespread in the sects. The reformed sect rapidly gained monastic followers, as well as the patronage of lay lords, and founded three monasteries in the Lhasa region within ten years (1409-19). By the middle of the sixteenth century, the Yellow-hats all but dominated the easterly province of Dbus.

In 1578 the "incarnate" head lama of the Yellow-hat sect received the title Dalai (Mongolian: 'Ocean') from Altan Qan of the Tumed Mongols. This title was then given posthumously to his 'incarnate' predecessors, so he is known in religious history as the 3rd Dalai Lama. When he died, his 'rebirth' was discovered to be none other than the great-grandson of Altan Qan himself. The 4th Dalai Lama was the only one not Tibetan by birth. This miraculous 'discovery' bound the religious fidelity of the Mongols thereafter to the Yellow-hat sect with the successive Dalai Lamas as hieratic heads.

Later on, Gushri Qan of the Qoshot Mongols entered into the "patron-lama" relationship with the 5th Dalai Lama [analogous to the thirteenth-century relationship between Qubilai Qan and 'Phags-pa Lama of the Sa-skya sect]. The lay ruler of Gtsang allied with the Red-hat Karma-pa sect continued to threaten the

Yellow-hats in the Lhasa area. Responding to a request from the 5th Dalai Lama, Gushri Qan led his cavalry into Tibet and defeated the lay ruler of Gtsang in 1642. As the de facto conqueror of Tibet, Gushri Qan then presented all its lands to the Dalai Lama as a 'religious gift'. A new form of theocratic government was established. Theoretically, the Dalai Lama held both religious and temporal power; but a regent was appointed to handle the daily affairs of State. The rdzong system developed by Ta'i Si-tu of the Phag-mo-gru dynasty was retained as the basic administrative structure. The Qan and his cavalry remained in Tibet to provide the military necessary to the viability of the new government. The successors to Gushri Qan lacked his vigor and Mongol control over the theocracy began to wane. By the time the 5th Dalai Lama died in 1682, the actual political control of Tibet was wielded by the regent, Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho.

VI. MANCHU INTERVENTION

Sangs-rgyas rgya-mtsho, seeking to rid Tibet of the Qashot Mongols who had allied themselves with the Manchu Emperor of

China, formed an alliance with the Dzungar Mongols, bitter foes of the Manchus. In 1697 Lha-bzang, a grandson of Gushri Qan, became Qan of the Qoshots and he set out to restore Mongol control over the Tibetan government. The power struggle between the qan and the regent ended in 1705 when the Mongols put the regent to death. During Lha-bzang Qan's reign, Manchu influence began to increase in Tibet, and the Dzungar Mongols decided to change the situation by force. On the pretext of avenging the murdered regent, Dzungar cavalry invaded central Tibet in 1717 and killed Lha-bzang Qan.

In retaliation, the Manchu Emperor K'ang-hsi (1662-1722) sent imperial armies into Tibet, drove out the Dzungars, and established an imperial garrison at Lhasa. The office of regent was replaced by a council of four ministers to handle governmental affairs. The garrison was withdrawn soon after the death of K'ang-hsi, but reinstated at the end of the civil war that erupted in Tibet (1727-8).

The attempts of a council minister, Pho-lha-nas, to establish a lay-oriented government relatively free of Manchu control were thwarted by his ambitious son and successor, whose precipitous actions led to his assassination in 1750 by the Manchu resident officials (ambans) in Lhasa. The garrison was

reinforced and the administrative structure altered. For the first time, the Dalai Lama assumed personal control over the council of ministers and the administration of the government.

When the 7th Dalai Lama died in 1757, the office of regent was established. Henceforth a high-ranking 'incarnate' lama was appointed regent to govern until the next Dalai Lama was old enough to resume rule. Such an interregnum after the death of each Dalai Lama encouraged the lama-regents and their cohorts to exploit their power. It is not without reason that only two of the Dalai Lamas from the 8th (born in 1758) and the 12th (died in 1875) lived long enough to rule and then only nominally for a couple of years.

VII. FOREIGN INVASIONS

The Manchu Emperors assumed the role of patron in the traditionally Mongol 'Patron-Lama' relationship upon which the Tibetan theocracy had been founded. When the Nepalese invaded Tibet in the late eighteenth century, the Ch'ien-lung Emperor sent an imperial army across Tibet to expel them and extract a treaty. That was the last time the Manchu Emperor was able to fulfill his duties as the patron of the Dalai Lama.

Throughout much of the nineteenth century, the Manchu court was threatened by foreign aggression and the protracted T'ai-p'ing Rebellion; consequently, when Tibet was invaded in 1841 by the Dogras from Kashmir and again by the Nepalese in 1855, no imperial troops were sent from China to aid the Tibetans. Although able to withstand the Dogra onslaught, they were defeated by the Nepalese and forced to conclude an unfavorable treaty.

The turn of the twentieth century found a weak China in turmoil and rivalry between Russia and Great Britain for spheres of influence in Asia. The British envisioned Tibet as a buffer zone to protect their economic interests in India from Russian imperialism. In 1904 a British expedition fought its way to Lhasa and forced an agreement extremely favorable to Britain on the Tibetan government. Again the ailing Manchu court did not send any military aid to the Tibetans.

After the Russians were defeated by the Japanese in 1905, the British began to lose interest in Tibet as a buffer zone. They relinquished their political control over Tibetan affairs; but retained their trade rights. This created a power vacuum in Tibet that the Chinese were eager to fill.

Chao Erh-feng, then governor of Szechuan province in western China, sent troops into Tibet. For the first time an im-

perial army came to attack, rather than to assist, the Tibetans. The traditional "patron-lama" relationship with the Manchu Emperor was at an end. When Chao's troops reached Lhasa in 1910, the 13th Dalai Lama, who had recently returned from Mongolia where he went to escape the 1904 British expedition, fled in exile to India.

Late in 1911 revolution against the Manchus broke out in China, and in time rebellion spread to the imperial garrison at Lhasa, where Chinese troops revolted against the Manchu officers. Divided against itself, the weakened garrison was finally captured by the Tibetans in the summer of 1912, and by January of 1913 the last of the garrison was deported from Tibet via India.

VIII. MODERN TIBET

In modern times, Tibet was to become the victim of a contradiction in political claims. Without historic precedence Yuan Shih-k'ai, first president of the Republic of China, unilaterally declared in April of 1912 that henceforth Tibet, Mongolia, and Sinkiang were to be regarded as "integral parts of China". This fallacious claim was incorporated into the new

constitution and was accepted by the Chinese as fact.

On the other hand, the 13th Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa early in 1913 and issued a declaration of Tibetan independence from Chinese suzerainty. After the deportation of the imperial garrison in 1913 until the death of the Dalai Lama in 1933, there were no Chinese officials in Tibet; and those from 1933 until 1949 were there at the sufferance of the Tibetan government. In the summer of 1949 the Communist forces were gaining control of mainland China, and the Tibetan government deported the Nationalist mission at Lhasa via India.

In October of 1950 the People's Liberation Army invaded eastern Tibet and captured the administrative headquarters of Chamdo (Chab-mdo). The Tibetan government appealed to the United Nations; but the Nationalist Chinese and the Soviet delegates insisted that since 'Tibet is an integral part of China' the problem was an internal one of that country and, thus, outside the jurisdiction of the United Nations. Consequently, no action was taken. Tibet was then forced to sign on 23 May 1951 at Peking a 17-point agreement for its 'peaceful liberation'. Point four of that agreement specifically stated that the existing political system of Tibet and the status and powers of the Dalai Lama would not be altered.

Several years of relative peace followed, during which the Chinese regime indoctrinated the Tibetans in the political system of communism. In 1956 the Chinese established a 'preparatory committee' whose function was to 'prepare' Tibet for status as an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China. This meant reforms relating to the social, economic, and political structures were to be carried out. Society in Tibet had been shaped for centuries by a religious-political system governed by an 'incarnate lama' who drew his officials on one side from the community of Yellow-hat monks, and from feudatory nobility on the other. The fabric of Tibetan society was so woven that any attempt to change the feudal warp would inevitably destroy the political woof on which the theocratic pattern depended.

Widespread discontent with Chinese policies and practices broke out in open rebellion at Lhasa on 10 March 1959, and the 14th Dalai Lama [like his predecessor half-a-century earlier] was forced to flee into exile in India. The aftermath of the revolt was marked by purges and the implementation of reforms. The Dalai Lama, at first hailed by the Chinese regime as a 'victim' of an imperialist plot, was finally denounced in 1964 as the 'ringleader' of the revolt.

In September of 1965 Tibet was officially declared an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China.

IX. CONCLUSION

From 1913 to 1950 Tibet was a sovereign state. Its centuries-old government maintained its political identity and protected its discrete culture and society. It issued its own currency, postage stamps, and [in 1947 for the first time] internationally-validated passports. It maintained its neutrality throughout World War II in spite of Chinese and American appeals for involvement. Yet, these factors counted for naught in the contemporary court of political expediency. The apocryphal claim that 'Tibet is an integral part of China' was accepted in 1950 by the world powers as gospel. Thus, Tibet became the victim of her own xenophobic isolationism that kept her theocratic government from establishing official diplomatic relations with other countries in the international community of nations.

The traditional culture and society of Tibet are no more; but its thirteen-centuries of recorded history remains to illuminate the importance of its role in Inner Asia.

X. BIBLIOGRAPHY

This bibliography is very selective, consisting of only five entries. For reasons given in the notes, the first four are recommended for general classroom use; the last one is not. This bibliography is short because the works cited below contain lengthy lists of publications and the reader is referred to them for specialized studies of Tibetan topics.

1. David Snellgrove & Hugh Richardson, A Cultural History of Tibet. Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers (New York) 1968; 291 pages.

A comprehensive text dealing with Tibetan culture in chronological order, covering the political, religious, and social developments of each successive period, as well as the arts and literature. Tibetan names are given orthographically in the text with a pronunciation guide given at the end. Adequately illustrated with black-and-white plates.

2. R. A. Stein, Tibetan Civilization. Stanford University Press (Stanford) 1972; 334 pages.

This text is arranged topically rather than chronologically, treating in sequence with the inhabitants, history, society,

religion, art and literature. It contains quite a few black-and-white plates and line drawings. Names in the historical section, as well as those of geographical regions and places, are given phonetically with an orthographic identification table at the end. Proper orthography predominates in the other sections. The history section is too synoptic for the twentieth century, summarizing such events in just three pages.

3. Giuseppe Tucci, Tibet: Land of Snows. Stein and Day, Publishers (New York) 1967; 216 pages.

This work also deals with Tibet topically, covering history, religion, art, daily life, birth-to-death, literature, and political administration in sequence. This book is profusely illustrated with over one hundred plates, many in full color. Names are given phonetically throughout with an orthographic equivalency index included at the end.

4. Tsepon W. D. Shakabpa, Tibet: A Political History. Yale University Press (New Haven) 1967; 369 pages.

Originally written in Tibetan by a former Tibetan finance minister and then translated into English, this text was thoroughly "edited" by Turrell V. Wylie. As the title states, the book deals fundamentally with political history. Names are given

phonetically throughout; but the proper orthography for each one is given in the comprehensive index. There are thirteen black-and-white plates, and in the end pocket a photo-reproduction of the international passport issued Mr. Shakabpa in 1947.

5. Tieh-tseng Li, Tibet: Today and Yesterday [a revised edition of The Historical Status of Tibet]. Bookman Associates (New York 1960; 324 pages.

This book was written by a former diplomatic official of the Nationalist Chinese government. It tries to prove China exercised sovereign control over Tibet for centuries and evidence contrary to that claim is omitted or reinterpreted, resulting in a distorted and incomplete picture of Tibetan history. There are no illustrations. Admitting in the introduction that he did not know Tibetan, the author spelled Tibetan names as they appeared in the sources he used. Some are transliterations of the Chinese, e.g., Hsia-ku-pa [p. 197] is: Shakabpa (author of number four above). Others are English corruptions, e.g., Carla [p. 22] is supposed to be the Tibetan: Phyang-na rdo-rje. Although well-reviewed by a non-Tibetologist when first published, this book is not recommended for general classroom use.