

## ***Tibetans in China: From Conflict to Protest***

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### **Abstract**

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the invasion/liberation of Tibet by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1950-1, parts of the Tibetan population in China and abroad have conflicted with and protested against the Chinese state. Ethnic conflict and protest in Tibet have been driven by competing understandings of Tibet's historical status and relationship with China. Tibet was incorporated into the Qing Empire (1641-1911) in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but became a *de facto* independent state after the fall of the Qing in 1911. Central Tibet continued to enjoy *de facto* independence throughout the Chinese Republican era (1912-1949) even though Chinese successor states continued to claim sovereignty over Tibet. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which defeated the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) in a civil war (1945-49) in 1949 had the military strength to enforce the Chinese claim. Conflicts erupted in the 1950s over CCP policies in Tibetan areas, which culminated in an uprising and the Dalai Lama's and Tibetan Government's flight into exile in 1959. Limited conflict continued for some years following the uprising. But as the PRC has strengthened its grip over Tibetan areas, ethnic Tibetan grievances about Chinese rule and CCP policies in the region came to be expressed through public protest rather than through open conflict.

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Although conflicts between various Tibetan and Chinese empires and kingdoms date back centuries (in 763 a Tibetan army captured the Tang capital of Chang'an), the modern conflict—i.e., between the now-exiled Tibetan Government and the PRC—began in the waning years of the Qing Empire (1644-1911) when the global order was on the brink of a major transformation. In the early twentieth century, Tibet was a self-governing protectorate of the Qing Empire, receiving military support from Beijing when needed in exchange for religious advice and legitimation from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the head of the Tibetan Government in Lhasa and an important leader of the Tibetan Buddhist faith (Oidtmann 2018). Tibet also usefully served the Qing as a highland buffer between China and the British Empire in South Asia. Although there were occasional conflicts, the relationship between Lhasa and Beijing—a relationship described by the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama as that of “patron and priest” (Shakabpa 1984)—was mutually convenient and relatively stable during the nineteenth century.

Strategic calculations changed when a British expeditionary force violently forced its way from India to the isolated Himalayan kingdom, ostensibly to establish diplomatic ties and to negotiate the border between Tibet and Sikkim, which the British had recently conquered, although the gambit was also understood to be motivated by a desire to contain Russia in central Asia. The British invasion, which claimed 4000 lives, greatly alarmed the Qing court, which was no longer able to take its relationship with Lhasa for granted. Determined to preserve its influence over Tibet and contain the British, the Qing began expanding their western frontier more deeply into the Tibetan territory of Kham (present-day Sichuan Province) through coercive and sometimes brutal force, administrative reform and colonization (Sperling 1976). Once Kham (eastern Tibet) was securely under direct rule, Qing troops marched on central Tibet, spurring the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and senior Tibetan Government officials to flee to India. The year was 1910. The following year the Qing Empire collapsed and the Dalai Lama returned to Tibet and began a purge of pro-China elites in the aristocracy and leading monasteries. The Dalai Lama also created a standing army of 8000 troops to defend against further Chinese incursions (Grunfeld 1987: 63).

The head of China's new Republican government Yuan Shikai asserted that Tibet would join Xinjiang and Mongolia as provinces in the new China. Tibet was offered seats in the National Assembly and a new five-colored Chinese flag was created, with the color black representing Tibet. However, the Republicans were beset by ongoing domestic conflicts and were too weak to directly assert their rule in the Qing's former periphery, allowing Tibet to enjoy a period of *de facto* independence, highlighted by Tibet's declaration of independence at the 1913 Simla Conference. Organized by Britain and attended by China to discuss Tibet's status, the conference was motivated by a British interest to retain influence in Tibet by preventing direct Chinese rule (Grunfeld 1987: 62-66; Smith 1996: 190). The Simla Convention ultimately acknowledged both Tibetan autonomy and Chinese "suzerainty" over Tibet, but disagreement over the border between political Tibet and China resulted in China's refusal to ratify the agreement, laying the ground for future hostilities (Goldstein 1997: 33-4).

Following the Great War British influence in the region waned and new powers emerged, notably Russia and Japan. China remained in constant internal conflict, as did its borderlands, although there was no single line of conflict between China, on the one hand, and political Tibet on the other. The eastern Tibetan region of Kham that sat between central Tibet and Han China was in turmoil as different groups fought the Chinese government, the Tibetan government and amongst themselves, just as these peoples and localities had fought against both Chinese and Tibetan armies during the age of empire (Yudru Tsomu 2015). Between 1911 and 1935 an estimated 4-500 major battles took place in this region alone (Grunfeld 1987: 69). Central Tibet was also riven by factionalism, particularly between the pro-British Dalai Lama and the pro-Chinese Panchen Lama who was the head of a powerful monastery in Shigatse and a long-standing rival of the Dalai Lama.

Following the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933 the Chinese Republican Government under Chiang Kai-shek established an office in Lhasa and would likely have sought direct control over Tibet had it not been for the Japanese invasion of 1937 (Goldstein 1997: 36). Following the end of Second World War civil war continued between the Republicans and the Chinese

Communist Party. After winning the civil war in 1949 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) moved quickly to establish its authority throughout the territories claimed by the former Qing Empire, including Tibetan regions. They did this in stages. The Simla Convention of 1913 recognized an inner and outer Tibet, with inner Tibet to the west of the Dri Chu (upper Yangze River) representing the region ruled by Lhasa, and outer Tibet (lands east of the Dri Chu) representing the ethnic Tibetan territories between inner Tibet and China.

The CCP continued to recognize the river as the border between the two Tibetan jurisdictions (Li 2016: 26). In 1949-50 the People's Liberation Army moved quickly to conquer outer (eastern) Tibet, incorporating the territories into the Chinese Provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan, while conducting negotiations with the Tibetan government in Lhasa about the future of inner (central and west) Tibet (also known as "Political Tibet"). The Tibetan government sought to maintain its independence and appealed to the United Nations for support, but the UN Office was concerned that hearing such an appeal might jeopardize efforts to secure a ceasefire in the Korean War (Knaus 1999: 75). After India's independence in 1947 Britain was no longer interested in maintaining Tibet's autonomous status, and after 1949 India was determined to establish good relations with the PRC (Goldstein 41). With limited and ineffective international support, Lhasa had little bargaining power. And its small and poorly resourced army were in no position to defend Political Tibet's *de facto* independence against the battle-hardened PLA.

Chinese troops rolled into Lhasa in 1951, "liberating" Tibet according to the CCP narrative, or "invading" Tibet in the language of the exile-Tibetan narrative. The Tibetan Government was forced to enter into a wide-sweeping political agreement with Beijing that affirmed Chinese sovereignty over the region. In the "Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet," which was signed by the Dalai Lama's representatives and the leadership of the CCP in 1951, it was agreed that the "Local Government of Tibet" would carry out reforms of its own accord when the people demanded it.<sup>1</sup> This agreement apparently did not apply to the Tibetan areas to the east of the Dri Chu that were now administered by four Chinese provinces. In these Tibetan areas local Chinese Communist Party officials proceeded earlier with the "democratic reforms" that had been launched across China since the early 1950s. Democratic reforms were designed as a first step toward socialist transformation and included the redistribution of land, the suppression of landlords, other "class enemies", and "counterrevolutionaries", as well as the provocation of frequently violent class struggle. In the 'minority' regions, leaders believed that class struggle and reform would ultimately lead class identity to supplant national (ethnic) identities. In making this assumption China's leaders were soon proved to be quite wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> There is much dispute about the status of the "Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" and the circumstances surrounding its signing. The Chinese government regards it as a binding legal document. Members of the Tibetan exile community have charged that the Tibetan delegation that traveled to Beijing did not have the authority to enter into such an agreement and that the agreement was signed under duress. See Goldstein (2007: 106-107) and Smith (1996: 294-304). For an account by a Tibetan witness to the talks and to the signing of the agreement see Goldstein, Sherap and Siebenschuh (2004). For a recent study of the origins of the agreement drawing on Chinese texts see Raymond (2020).

The initiation of democratic reforms in eastern Tibet from 1956 caused tremendous upheaval and anxiety, not least among traditional Tibetan elites and the Tibetan Buddhist clergy. Chinese soldiers and administrators recruited activists to assist in the unleashing of class struggle. Tibetans were divided into three primary classes: *jorden* (owners of property), *jording* (middle class) and *jorme* (the property or landless class) (Smith 1996: 401). The *jorden* had their properties confiscated and were subjected to public criticism, beatings and other forms of humiliation. Potential opponents of Chinese rule (“reactionaries”) were also targeted. Although CCP policy called for the protection of religion during democratic reforms, in eastern Tibet monasteries lost their estates and means of subsistence, which greatly reduced their size and influence. The Tibetan world was being turned upside down.

The Communist reforms in eastern Tibet ultimately triggered rebellion. A revolt that began simultaneously in Sertar and Nyarong in the Garzê Tibetan Autonomous Region in Sichuan in February 1956 spread throughout eastern Tibet. By the end of March revolts had erupted in 18 out of 21 counties in Garzê (Li 2016: 12). As the conflict escalated the PLA brought in heavy artillery, deploying the air force to bomb the main monastery in Lithang where two to three thousand Tibetans had taken refuge. The conflict spread to Amdo (the Tibetan cultural region that is today part of Qinghai and northern Sichuan) in 1957 where uprisings occurred across 24 counties “involving 307 monasteries, and more than 100,000 people of 240 tribes” (2016: 56). Benno Weiner (2020: 187) estimates that the PRC security forces killed or imprisoned one tenth of the Tibetan population in Qinghai Province during the revolts of 1958-59.

Beijing played down the revolts in Kham and Amdo as well as the ethnonationalist character of the mobilization. Chairman of the Nationalities Affairs Commission Liu Keping admitted to foreign journalists that there had been revolts, but denied they were motivated by nationalism. Noting that the revolts were not in “Tibet”, but in “western Sichuan” Chairman Liu claimed that they had been “instigated by remnant Kuomintang forces, and launched by a few feudal landlords hostile to the introduction of even the most elementary reforms in the backward social structure of that region” (cited in Smith 1996: 409). Internally within the party, however, there were warnings of the specter of “local nationalism.” Those accused of supporting “local nationalism” (Ch. *difang minzu zhuyi*)—“a complex of characteristics including placing the interests of one’s nationality above the interests of the nation, being hostile to other nationalities, and, in the extreme, advocating nationality separatism”—in Tibetan areas would pay a heavy price (Goldstein, Sherpa & Siebenschuh 2004: 225).

The Khampa revolts pre-dated a sense of a pan-Tibetan identity that would energize later Tibetan protests. At the time the revolts were seen as an eastern Tibetan problem, distinct from events in Lhasa and this view was shared both by Lhasa elites and the Khampa rebels (Shakya 1999: 172-3). But it was not long before the rebellions in eastern Tibet began to fuel tensions between Lhasa and Beijing. The rebellion in the east and subsequent PLA suppression led to an outpouring of refugees from Kham into central Tibet where Communist reforms had not yet been implemented. Refugees, including armed rebels and their families, flowed into Lhasa through 1956 and 1957, with most living in a makeshift camp on the outskirts of the city (Li 2016: 17; Goldstein, Sherpa & Siebenschuh 2004: 221). The Khampa brought with them frightening tales of their experiences of

China's reforms, including stories of beatings and murder and of the humiliation of monks and the desecration of sacred sites. Lhasa Tibetans who had long considered the lands of the Khampa as a different world, began to fear that they would soon be treated in the same way.

As the Khampa community in Lhasa continued to grow, Khampa rebels in Lhasa organized a new guerilla movement called Chushi Gangdruk (Four Rivers and Four Mountains)—an ancient name for Kham. Headed by a former Lhasa merchant and comprising men from 37 tribes, the movement spread into Amdo and central Tibet, making the conflict pan-Tibetan rather than merely regional (Li 2016: 70). Eighteen months of sporadic fighting culminated in further increases in the number of refugees in Lhasa and growing tensions between Lhasa and Beijing, which held the Tibetan Government responsible for the activities of Khampa guerillas in the region (Shakya 1999: 173). Tensions turned into open conflict in March 1959 when a Khampa-led uprising in Lhasa led to the flight into exile of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government. After quashing the 1959 rebellion the CPP declared the Seventeen Point Agreement no longer valid and began introducing radical reforms to central Tibetan society and economy. Beijing's assertion of direct control in Tibet would ultimately bring an end to the ethnic conflict but it would also unleash new waves of ethnic protest among successive generations of Tibetans. From exile the Tibetan Government continues to lobby for greater autonomy and protections for Tibetans in China. China's official view is that Tibetan Government proposals are merely a guise for independence—a “splittist” stance that seeks to weaken the Chinese motherland. Not surprisingly, decades of talk between Beijing and Dharamsala—the home in India of the exiled Tibetan Government—have failed to find common ground (Rabgey and Sharlho 2004).

Prior to China's annexation of Tibet in 1950-1 there was no clear fault line between China and Tibet. This is largely because there was no widely shared sense of being Tibetan – regional identities were paramount. As political scientist Dawa Norbu (1992: 10) observed,

“Tibetans identified themselves as Khampa, Topa, Tsangpa and Amdo-wa of Kham, Toi, Tsang (Shigatse) and Amdo regions. ... However, since the Chinese takeover [of Lhasa] in 1959, there has been a growing consciousness, particularly among ‘urban’ Tibetans, about a pan-Tibetan identity that sharply differentiates itself from *rgya-rigs* or *rgya-mi*—the Chinese/Han. The ‘in-group’ is increasingly identified as *bodpa* or *bod-rigs*.” The 1959 uprising established a clear line of conflict between the Dalai Lama's exile government on the one hand, and Beijing on the other. The uprising and the wider conflicts of the late 1950s also lay the foundations for the evolution of a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness (Shokdung 2016).

The 1959 uprising also led to US involvement in the conflict in support of pro-independence Tibetans. Since the Korean War, the US had become increasingly determined to counter the expansion of Communism in East Asia. In the aftermath of the 1959 uprising the CIA began covertly providing ammunition and supplies to a Tibetan resistance movement. The CIA operation also provided training in India, Nepal and the USA for a select group of Tibetan guerillas. And American planes parachuted fighters into their deployment zones (McGranahan 2010). The ostensible goal of the US operation was to keep alive hopes of an autonomous Tibet, but the US also sought to increase pressure on Beijing by raising the costs of controlling Tibetan

areas (Knaus 1999; Shakya 1999; 170-1). The CIA operation, dubbed 'Project Circus', was abruptly ended in 1972 on the eve of Richard Nixon's historic visit to Beijing and US rapprochement with China. The US, it soon became clear, had been motivated to pressure China rather than by Tibetan independence, and support for Tibet was quickly jettisoned as Sino-American ties improved. As the Dalai Lama later observed, "[t]he Americans had a different agenda from the Tibetans" (Mirsky 2013).

The introduction of reforms and the 1959 uprising were not the only factors beginning to link the fates and shape the identity of the various peoples of the Tibet Plateau in the 1950s. In 1954 the CCP launched a project to identify and classify the state's "minority nationalities" (*shaoshu minzu*). Initially focused on ethnic groups in Yunnan Province, the project was gradually expanded to include all regions (Mullaney 2010). Over many years the classification team ultimately determined, using Stalin's criteria for a "nation"—i.e. a historically constituted, stable community of people, sharing a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture—that the PRC was home to 55 minority nationalities. The Tibetans (Ch. *Zangzu*) were officially classified as a "national minority" and, included in their numbers, were all the Tibetan-speakers from U-Tsang, Amdo and Kham. Even though many of these peoples, notably many Amdowa and Khampa, did not commonly refer to themselves as Tibetans (Tib. *Bod pa*) the Communist Party determined that they all belonged to a single minority nationality. Despite Communist Party leaders' fears that "local nationalism" would undermine their state-building project, the *minzu* classification component of the state-building project contributed to the forging of a pan-Tibetan identity where none such identity previously existed (Hillman 2018).

The emergence of a pan-Tibetan identity constructed against a Han Chinese other (Hillman & Henfry 2006) was further fueled by the internationalization of the 'Tibet question'—the conflict between the exiled Tibetan Government and Beijing over the status of Tibet—in the 1980s. The internationalization of Tibet's status was a deliberate strategy employed by the Tibetan Government-in-exile as a means of improving their negotiating position with the Chinese government in seeking greater autonomy for Tibet. Critically, although the government in exile had abandoned its goal of independence in favor of a push for greater autonomy, the exiles called for autonomy to be institutionalized in a Greater Tibetan autonomous region that would encompass all Tibetan areas in China. Although China rejected the proposal, the early post-Mao leadership of the Communist Party acknowledged that mistakes had been made in Tibet and voiced support for reforms that would strengthen ethnic autonomy, such as using Tibetan as the language of administration in Tibet and requiring all Han Chinese cadres to learn that language. During the same period in the 1980s, the Dalai Lama began to mobilize international support for his ideas, which inspired hope for change among Tibetans in China and in exile. In September 1987 the Dalai Lama was invited to give a landmark address before the US Congress where he outlined a "Five Point Peace Plan for Tibet." Chinese authorities condemned the visit.

The speech triggered a new wave of ethnic Tibetan political mobilization. On 27 September, several days after the Dalai Lama's speech to Congress, monks began a street protest at the Barkhor in the centre of the remaining Tibetan part of the city of Lhasa, and the site of the sacred

Jokhang Temple. Some carried a Tibetan flag and shouted “Tibet is independent” and may “the Dalai Lama live for 10,000 years.” Ordinary citizens joined the monks and protests continued through 1 October, Chinese National Day. Police arrested some of the protestors, but protestors followed them to the police station where police fired into the crowd, killing two people including a 14-year-old boy (Schwartz 1994). These events led to more protests outside government offices in Lhasa.

Further political mobilization continued periodically through 1988 and intensified in the first few months of 1989. Protests at this time were largely confined to Lhasa and a few other urban areas in the Tibet Autonomous Region (Shakya 1999). On 8 March 1989, following renewed street protests on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s flight into exile, Chinese authorities declared martial law and Lhasa went into lockdown. That same year the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, significantly boosting the international profile of the Dalai Lama and Tibet, particularly among western audiences. Following the PLA killing of street protestors in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square on 4 June 1989, the ‘Free Tibet’<sup>2</sup> movement gained even more international support, as exile allegations of human rights abuses in Tibet began to gain traction in the international media. The Dalai Lama’s rising international popularity and influence became a rallying point for Tibetans, and buoyed hopes for concessions from Beijing.

The fallout from Tiananmen did not, however, lead to concessions. On the contrary, the experience empowered Party conservatives whose arguments about the need for greater social control and ideological education prevailed in the Politburo. Communist Party General Secretary Zhao Ziyang, who supported increased autonomy for Tibet, was deposed (Bao Tong et al 2009) and his successors tightened security and stepped up attacks against local nationalism. Beijing would henceforth take a more unified approach to governing the Tibetan regions, with an emphasis on security or what the CCP political lexicon refers to as “stability maintenance” (Ch. *weiwén*), economic development and poverty alleviation. CCP leaders believed that rising incomes and living standards were the secret to winning hearts and minds (Hillman 2010). However, as long as Tibetans felt insecure about their ability to preserve, express and develop their ethnic distinctiveness in everyday economic, social and cultural practices, economic development would not provide a solution to Tibet’s political integration into the PRC (Topgyal 2013; Hillman 2016a).

Economic development contributed to a growing sense of ethnic insecurity among Tibetans. State-led investment projects during the 1990s and 2000s led to an unprecedented Han-Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘Free Tibet’ movement has encompassed a variety of actors for whom “freedom” carried different meanings. For some, “freedom” equated to independence for Tibet. For others, “freedom” referred to greater autonomy for Tibetan peoples within the People’s Republic of China. Since 1988 the official position of the Dalai Lama and the exiled Tibetan Government, formally known as the Central Tibetan Administration, has been to seek greater autonomy for a unified Tibetan region within China. Beijing has treated this proposal with contempt, accusing the Dalai Lama and exiled Tibetans of using autonomy for a Greater Tibet as a steppingstone to achieving independence by stealth.

migration into Tibetan areas, and rising intraregional inequality, particularly in urban areas (Fischer 2005; Hillman 2008). The demolition of old town centers and their replacement with modern buildings permanently altered the character of Tibetan towns, contributing to a sense of cultural loss and disruption. In rural areas, although new infrastructure was largely welcomed by farmers, resettlement and grassland enclosure programs were disrupting the uniquely Tibetan way of life of nomadic communities. The entire Tibetan landscape was being dramatically transformed by the juggernaut of Chinese modernization (Nyima and Yeh 2016; Yeh 2013; Roche, Hillman & Leibold 2017; Hillman 2013).

Furthermore, the “sticks” that accompanied the “carrots” of development, included expanded surveillance capabilities, with a particular focus on organized Tibetan Buddhism. Several monasteries, particularly larger, historically significant monasteries, maintained close ties with the exile Tibetan community and Chinese authorities regarded such monasteries as hotbeds of Tibetan nationalism. Taking a more unified approach to social control in Tibet, Chinese authorities began to introduce controls on monasteries across the Tibetan region—controls that had previously only applied to monasteries in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) that were close to the former seat of Tibetan government in Lhasa. Across Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan Provinces monasteries of all Tibetan Buddhist orders were increasingly subjected to bans on the display of images of the Dalai Lama, forced denunciations of the Dalai Lama, compulsory patriotic education courses for monks, restrictions on the number of monks each monastery could employ, and more direct intervention by the state in the internal governance of monasteries (Barnett 2009; 2012). Although the state had funded since the 1980s the reconstruction and reparation of monasteries that were damaged or destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, and some areas were funding monastery renovation for the purposes of tourism promotion (Hillman 2003, 2005), tensions over operational restrictions were mounting, and would soon spill over into local communities, where monasteries remained central to cultural identities and ethnic security—the perceived ability to preserve, express and develop one’s ethnic distinctiveness in everyday life. (Hillman 2014). Further, the state’s unified security-first approach to governing monastic activity was beginning to link the fates of monasteries across different regions and sects for the first time in history, overriding centuries of division and conflict. Perhaps more than ever before the Dalai Lama, who had once been the leader of only one school of Tibetan Buddhism, was becoming a rallying force for all Tibetans disaffected by developments in their region.

Instability returned to Tibet in 2008 when a new wave of street protests erupted in Lhasa. On March 10, 2008, the anniversary of the Dalai Lama’s flight into exile—“Uprising Day” as it is known to many Tibetans, monks from Drepung and Sera, two of Lhasa’s three great monasteries, were intercepted when attempting to march on the city center. Some of the monks were reportedly beaten and arrested. On the following day another group of monks attempted to march to demand the release of their colleagues. More monks were reportedly beaten and detained. Security forces surrounded Drepung and Sera, as well as Ganden, the third great monastery of Lhasa, to prevent further mobilization. However, lay people began to demonstrate in the streets in support of the monks and in opposition to China’s policies (Smith 2010). Some waved the Tibetan national flag. Over the following days peaceful demonstrations turned to violent protests as some protestors began attacking government offices and police stations. In

contrast with the protests of 1987-89, the 2008 protests were characterized not only by 'ethnic protest' against the state, but also by 'ethnic conflict', inter-communal ethnic violence targeted at non-Tibetans (Hillman 2016a). Han Chinese and Hui Muslims became targets, as did their businesses. In Lhasa riots caused the deaths of 18 people and many shops were destroyed.<sup>3</sup> Tibetan exiles reported the deaths of 200 Tibetans and the arrests of thousands more in the crackdown that followed (Smith 2010).

Street protests quickly spread across plateau to Tibetan areas in Gansu, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces. As many as 30,000 Tibetans participated in more than 100 separate "mass incidents" (*quntixing shijian*)—a broad Communist Party term for any form of social unrest, including protests, the public airing of grievances, and physical skirmishes that arise from "internal contradictions".<sup>4</sup> The unprecedented scale of political mobilization across the plateau highlighted a united sense of disaffection among Tibetans from all regions—a feature of the protests underlined by the sharing of information among protestors via social media about demonstrations and the responses of security forces. China's leaders pointed to the use of social media among Tibetans from across the plateau and with Tibetan exiles to charge that the protests had been premeditated and coordinated by the "Dalai Clique" and hostile forces determined to weaken and split China. However, no clear evidence was provided to indicate the protests were more than a spontaneous uprising, with protestors drawing inspiration from news about protests in other regions. Nevertheless, exchanging information about the protests was treated as a serious offence and many Tibetans were subsequently jailed for sending text messages and posting observations on social media sites.

The 2008 street protests had a galvanizing effect on a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness. It was arguably the first time that Tibetans from all regions had voiced common grievances in such a mass mobilization. The protests also brought together Tibetans from diverse backgrounds. Whereas most participants in the demonstrations of the late 1980s were monks and nuns, the 2008 street protests were led and joined by Tibetans from all walks of life. However, the authorities' response to the protests had an arguably greater impact on the emergence of a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness. A security crackdown on Tibetans involved mass arrests and incarcerations of many people involved in the protests or who were found to have shared information about protests. Harsh sentences for vague offences were meted out to Tibetans across the plateau, causing widespread anger. The number of security personnel in the region was greatly increased and heavily armed police now routinely patrol Tibetan towns, causing resentment and reinforcing the perception that Tibetans are targets.

In the wake of the 2008 protests Tibetans of all walks of life encountered discrimination, which also served to galvanize a pan-Tibetan ethnic consciousness, even among Tibetan Communist Party members and state employees. Airports introduced special security lanes for screening

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<sup>3</sup> The Chinese government reported 18 civilian deaths. See various Chinese-language news reports from this period.

<sup>4</sup> According to China's official news agency Xinhua, there were more than 150 incidents of vandalism or burning across Tibetan areas during the two weeks from March 10 to March 25, 2008. See <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2008-04-01/233615271291.shtml>.

Tibetan passengers, and many hotels in major cities such as Beijing refused accommodation to Tibetans. Ethnic Tibetan public servants, including policemen, were subjected to the same treatment, reminding people that their ethnic status trumped other forms of identity and that Tibetans were “persons of interest” regardless of their years of service to the state or dedication to the Party, heightening tensions between ethnic Tibetan citizens and the state (Hillman 2014). Further restrictions on Tibetans’ movements involved the widespread confiscation of passports, and restrictions on travel between different parts of the plateau. Tibetans identified as potential troublemakers were often prevented from traveling outside of their home county. For many years after 2008, it was almost impossible for Tibetans resident outside of the TAR to visit the TAR. Those who are able to obtain permission to visit Lhasa must report to the Lhasa offices of their home prefecture, which would substitute their national identity card (Ch. *shenfenzhen*) for a temporary ID card and then check the visitors’ whereabouts and movements each day. Although such restrictions have recently been loosened different administrative requirements continue to apply to Tibetan travelers, prompting many Tibetans to observe that the only people free to travel in Tibet are the Chinese (foreigners’ travel in the region is also restricted).

Post 2008 other forms of surveillance were introduced and strengthened in Tibetan areas, including grid surveillance in cities and the deployment of ‘volunteer’ observers in villages whose job is to report on suspicious activities. As the security crackdown successfully shut down further street protests, political mobilization took on a new and terrible form. Although the first self-immolation took place in 2009, from 2011 the number of self-immolations dramatically increased. Although state media continued to blame splittists and anti-China forces for orchestrating the self-immolations, and labeled the self-immolators as criminals, the statements left by a large number of self-immolators suggested that the violent acts were driven by fear and despair over cultural survival, and the desperate desire to draw wider attention to their concerns (Woeser 2016). Like the street protests that preceded them, the self-immolations appeared to be driven by ethnic insecurity. Although the self-immolations divided the Tibetan population, with some referring to the self-immolators as heroes and others condemning the acts, the self-immolations continued to drive a pan-Tibetan conversation about the issues at the heart of the desperate political protest. The actions forced Tibetans from diverse backgrounds, including those who had previously shown little interest in politics or policy, to confront questions of Tibetan cultural identity and its future in the People’s Republic of China. In recent years there have been widespread reports of Tibetans of all generations taking greater interest in preserving their language and cultural heritage. There is also a new movement to re-Tibetanize the Tibetan language by replacing Chinese loan words with Tibetan constructs. Notably, loan words from other languages such as English and Hindi are not targeted (Thurston 2018).

Tibetans are also increasingly taking advantage of social media to engage in Tibetan-language debates about developments in Tibet, Chinese policies and laws, and human rights, creating new links among Tibetans from across the plateau as well as Tibetans outside China (Robin 2016). Such dialogues serve to reinforce a pan-Tibetan identity among intellectuals and educated Tibetans across the region. Artists and writers have also responded to recent events with musical and poetic works that rally Tibetan readers around unifying themes, and which cleverly employ traditional metaphors to express cultural identities and feelings of ethnic insecurity, and to evade

detection by online censors (Roche, Leibold and Hillman 2020). According to Jabb (2015: 137) “the frequent use of metaphors such as ‘red wind,’ and ‘wild yak,’ and their status as unifying imageries, demonstrate how cultural trauma serves as a rallying point for the Tibetan people...these figurative expressions reinforce Tibetan solidarity.”

The events of 2008 and their aftermath have exposed deep tensions between competing versions of Tibetan ethnic identity in China. Chinese laws guarantee national minorities the right to preserve and develop their languages and culture, and the Chinese state supports a wide range of cultural and religious activities, including festivals, cultural performances and centers of religious learning. However, the Chinese Party-state sponsors highly sanitized forms of cultural expression that treat ethnic identity as a subset of Chinese identity. Non-threatening differences in foods, dress, song and dance are widely celebrated as long as they can be perceived as a variation of Chineseness and not as markers of a separate civilization (Hillman and Henfry 2006). Herein lies part of the problem that fuels ethnic unrest in China’s Tibetan areas. Although China’s ethnic Tibetans are citizens of the People’s Republic of China, most Tibetans do not consider themselves to be Chinese in the cultural sense. When speaking in Tibetan, Tibetans do not use the term Han Chinese to distinguish this cultural group from minority groups in the PRC; Tibetans simply refer to the Han Chinese as “Chinese” (Tib. *rgya mi*). The conflation of Chinese cultural identity (Ch. *Zhonghua*) with Chinese citizenship (Ch. *Zhongguo*) is an ideological problem that predates the PRC—it represents political and ideological efforts to incorporate diverse groups in the modern Chinese nation following the collapse of empire, a project begun by the nationalists under Sun Yatsen after 1911 and continued by the Chinese Communist Party after 1949. The ideological challenge is further compounded by the PRC’s more recent promotion of a rejuvenated Greater China (also referred to as the China Dream), which is clearly rooted in Han conceptualizations of China, Chinese civilization and Chinese history.

Expressions of cultural identity that challenge state-sanctioned versions of ethnicity in China are likely to be branded as “local nationalism,” which is considered a counterrevolutionary threat to China’s national security. This framing of ethnic difference in the PRC has its roots both in the CCP’s nationalist ideology as well as in Maoist approaches to identifying potential friends and enemies of the revolution. Its effect is to delegitimize certain forms of Tibetan identity and nearly all forms of Tibetan political mobilization, which fuels further ethnic grievances. Schwartz’s (1994: 189) observation of the previous cycle of unrest remains apt today: “[a]ssertions of Tibetan national identity are always perceived as challenges to the communist political system, and predictably this sets in motion the mechanisms of Party control. Continuing nationalist protest thus exposes an endemic crisis of political control in Tibet.”

As Topgyal (2013) has observed, a major challenge for reconciling Tibetan ethnic identity with membership in the wider Chinese nation lies in the persistent labeling of Tibetan ethnic expression as “local nationalism.” When Tibetans mobilize to express opposition to state policies or when Tibetans express versions of their identity outside of ideologically sanctioned parameters, the PRC identifies a national security threat and responds accordingly. Even traditionally ‘safe’ expressions of identity such as the wearing of traditional robes (Tib. *chupa*) are sometimes treated with suspicion insofar as they are perceived to be expression of local

nationalism. Key sources of Tibetan identity thus become legitimate targets for surveillance and containment—e.g., organized Buddhism and the Tibetan language. However, the state's response further undermines Tibetans' sense of ethnic security, and yet the idea that Tibetan protestors are acting out of a sense of ethnic insecurity is obscured by ideology and historical framings of the Tibet question. "Security" remains the privy of the state, and not of peoples. Even though the security studies and political science literatures now embrace broader notions of security, including "ethnic security", studies on Tibet and China's ethnic policies have tended to reinforce the view that the problem of Tibetan identity in China is one of "local nationalism" versus "national security."

The political integration of China's Tibetan population demands that Tibetans are able to reconcile their dual identities as ethnic Tibetans and Chinese citizens. In the nearly 70 years since the annexation of Tibet this nation-building goal has not been reached. There have been recent calls in China for new debates about state policies toward the region. Several Chinese scholars have proposed a "second generation" of ethnic policies that emphasizes individual rights and multiculturalism over regional ethnic autonomy (Leibold 2016). Such debates, however, are premised on concerns that regional ethnic autonomy—i.e., the creation of Tibetan autonomous regions—has contributed to a hardening of ethnic boundaries, and reinforced local nationalism. Some analysts argue that the political integration of Tibetans into the PRC will require even more radical thinking within China—thinking that frees the expression of national identity from the Maoist label of "local nationalism", and that recognizes Tibetans' identity insecurity (Topgyal 2013; Hillman 2016a). There is no indication, however, that such new thinking will gain a foothold in Chinese policy circles in the near future, suggesting that unresolved tensions over what it means to be Tibetan in the People's Republic of China will likely manifest in new forms of protest and political mobilization.

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