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Tibet: Myths and Realities

BARRY SAUTMAN

The Tibetan émigré ideology propagated since 1959, when the Dalai Lama and many followers left Tibet, is based on claims of Chinese genocide and colonialism, claims now embedded in Western thinking about Tibet. Component myths include the view that Tibet was incontrovertibly independent until 1951 but has since been reduced to an occupied and exploited country, and the belief that Tibetans have met with demographic catastrophe and a cultural genocide aimed at their eventual extirpation. China, it is argued, is also responsible for the lack of a breakthrough in negotiations on the Tibet question. But how well do these claims stand up to scrutiny—a scrutiny that will increase despite the continued elevation of the Dalai Lama’s international stature?

WAS TIBET A STATE?

Tibet, from the fall of the Qing dynasty to the outset of Chinese Communist Party rule (that is, from 1913 to 1951), is often described as having had “de facto independence.” Regions may slip outside the control of weak states that had governed them and that still assert claims to sovereignty over them, but no category of “de facto independence” in international law entitles an alienated region to be deemed a state by other states. A mid-1960s secession movement is said to have brought ethnic Ibo in southeast Nigeria “de facto independence” for several years, with five small states recognizing Biafra. When Nigeria recovered its strength, its eastern region was brought back to the fold. That Biafra resisted Nigerian sovereignty did not make it at any

time a state under international law. The Russian republic of Chechnya was said to have “de facto independence” from 1991 to 1999 as separatists fended off Russia’s reassertion of authority. No state recognized Chechnya during the separatist ascendancy, however, and today, as Russian efforts to consolidate federation rule continue, no country, save Taliban Afghanistan, regards Chechnya as a state. Under international law, “de facto independence” for a state only results when major states extend official recognition, as with Bangladesh in 1971 and the former Yugoslav republics in the early 1990s. Major states may do so when a prior claimant central government in fact or in law relinquishes its claim, as in the Soviet case. Prospective states that receive recognition by major states usually attain and maintain their independence; those that do not usually perish.

No major state recognized “de facto independent” Tibet because China had a colorable claim to sovereignty. A United States State Department spokesman noted in 1999 that since 1942 the United States has regarded Tibet as part of China, and during the 1940s United States actions repeatedly affirmed that view. When “de facto independent” Tibet appealed to the United Nations in 1950 over the “invasion” by China, its only sponsor was El Salvador, the sole state apart from Japan and Nazi Germany that in the 1930s had recognized the Japanese puppet-state of Manchukuo in northeast China. Old Tibet (that is, Tibet before the 1950s) was a cultural entity and fulfilled none of the conventional international law criteria of a state. Pro-Tibet independence journalist Isabel Hilton has asserted that Tibet “was not a nation in the modern sense” and Tibetologist Donald Lopez has observed that Tibetans did not identify as a single cohesive

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unit, but had regional identities.¹ Tibet had no territory (in the sense required for statehood under international law) because China had a conflicting claim and, as UN admission criteria attest, an independent state is one free of any claims to its whole territory by an existing state.

Tibet had no government of the kind needed for statehood. Eastern Plateau (ethnographic Tibet) satrapies were not sufficiently centralized to be credited as states, and the Lhasa regime had no more legal authority to govern the area under its control as anything other than a part of China than did “last emperor” Pu Yi and his Manchukuo minions. Finally, old Tibet did not have the legal capacity to enter into foreign relations. This requires that a state have over it no authority but international law (therefore Britain, the main power in the early twentieth century that sought relations with Tibet, attempted to negotiate with the Dalai Lama through the Chinese government. China, even at its weakest, continuously asserted sovereignty over Tibet, precisely because major states had not recognized it).

It is sometimes argued that a 17-point agreement concluded by the People’s Republic central government and the Dalai Lama in 1951 indicates that China deemed Tibet to be independent. Forty years of civil wars and Japanese aggression had left much of China outside central control, even though these areas remained part of China in the view of the national government and other states. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Beijing thus made agreements for “peaceful liberation” with many local leaders in, for example, the Yunnan, Xinjiang, and Hunan regions. Unlike the agreements between the United States and Native Americans, which noted their nationhood but denied them the rights of citizens, China reincorporated errant regions on the basis of the legal equality of all ethnic groups. The agreement with the Dalai Lama did not constitute recognition of a separated state. Moreover, the

recovery of alienated parts of China by the new regime was not tantamount to invasion or occupation any more than the armed action undertaken by United States President Abraham Lincoln after he declared in his First Inaugural Address in 1861 that the perpetuity of national integrity is a universally recognized principle.²

IS TIBET EXPLOITED?

The Tibetan émigré community insists that Tibet is exploited like a colony to benefit “Chinese settlers and China’s central government exchequer.”³ Unlike the abundant historiography of European colonialist rapacity, however, émigré documentation of exploitation is based on thinner evidence. Émigré works assert that until the early 1990s, revenue from the exploitation of Tibet’s mineral resources amounted to 1.5 billion yuan, but this merely equals the value of all minerals sold from Tibet. These claims involve a few million United States dollars of annual “revenue,” that is, sales by the state-owned enterprises that run Tibet’s major mines, which cannot be equated with profit. Mining throughout the People’s Republic is a notorious money-loser. Losses by the mid-1990s were so great that the industry almost collapsed and few foreign companies were willing to invest in it. When in 1998 China pledged to end chaos in the mining industry, 85 percent of the country’s mines reported losses. Profit making in China’s west is even more difficult, due to a lack of infrastructure and supporting industries. Only a couple companies with foreign capital operate mines on the Eastern Plateau and neither they nor the state-owned enterprises have reported a profit. The one claimed exception is the Yulong Copper Mine, which the émigrés assert earned \$2.5 million in one year—not much, given that investment exceeded \$150 million. In any case, mineral extraction in Tibet plays a tiny role in Chinese mining, which involves 21 million people nationwide while the Tibet Mining Bureau employs 2,400.

Forestry is the other alleged basis for China’s exploitation of Tibet. State-owned enterprises engaged in heavy logging on the Eastern Plateau until major floods in 1998 impelled the central government to ban logging in most Tibetan areas and reassign many loggers to reforestation work. The émigrés assert that from 1949 to 1998, Eastern Plateau forests generated over \$241 million in taxes and profits for Chinese state logging enterprises, but even this small undocumented figure is misleading. Definitions of state-owned enterprise “profit” have varied enormously over the years, as have incentives for misreporting profit. Profit

¹Isabel Hilton, *The Search for the Panchen Lama* (London: Viking, 1999), p. 114; Donald Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 197.

²During the nineteenth century and first 75 years of the twentieth, a Tibetan-ruled Himalayan kingdom had essentially the same degree of “de facto independence” that the Tibetan émigrés now claim for old Tibet and that was absorbed by its protector. Indeed, the Tibetan émigré administration, which has supported India on every issue—from Kashmir to nuclear weapons—made no protest when in 1975 India took over Sikkim.

³Tibetan Youth Congress (TYC), *Development for Whom? A Report on the Chinese Development Strategies in Tibet and Their Impacts* (Dharamsala: TYC, 1995).

should not be calculated without taking into account the costs of providing housing, health care, insurance, and other services to employees. In 1995 these costs amounted to 55 percent of the state forest sector's profits; also to be considered is the burden of pensions in an industry with one retiree per three active workers. State loans thus have had to compensate for the high cost of providing China with inexpensive wood, with state logging companies heavily indebted. Some Eastern Plateau companies have sustained losses for years, and more than 20 large companies were deep in debt by the time of the logging ban, with some unable to pay wages. At the same time, China's timber imports have shot up: importing lumber is cheaper than producing it domestically.

Unlike the European colonial powers, China since ancient times has sought to guarantee the coherence of its territory by subsidizing—not exploiting—its periphery. The People's Republic says it has expended 40 billion yuan over the past four decades in subsidies to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) (political Tibet) alone. In 1994 Beijing financed 83 percent of TAR government expenditures; taxes and enterprise income contributed 4 percent, and other provinces and international NGOs provided the rest. Tibetan incomes are lower than the Chinese average, but not unexpectedly, given Tibet's remoteness and harsh terrain. Subsidies, however, have resulted in steadily improving living standards, a trend at odds with representations of Tibet as particularly exploited.

A DEMOGRAPHIC CATASTROPHE?

The heart of the émigré charge of genocide is the idea of a demographic catastrophe that resulted in the deaths of 1.2 million or more Tibetans at the hands of the Chinese from 1949 to 1979. A highly specific table of deaths by cause and by region of Greater Tibet is publicized by the émigrés, with the sources of these numbers undisclosed. (Greater Tibet is all areas in the People's Republic with a substantial Tibetan population or that may have had a substantial Tibetan population historically; it encompasses the whole of the Tibetan Plateau.) Among these figures is an alleged half-million starvation deaths, mainly in the Great Leap Forward famine of 1959 to 1961. Only anecdotal evidence for all deaths by starvation among Tibetans is available and comes from the eastern edge of the plateau, where the Tibetan share of the population has long been minimal and where most of those who died were non-Tibetans.

Scholarly works on Tibet do not describe a “demographic annihilation” in the eastern Tibetan

areas. The leading émigré historian, Tsering Shakya, for example, states that “thousands” of Tibetans died either in the suppression of rebellions or as the result of economic disaster, many fewer than the hundreds of thousands claimed by the émigré administration. A demographer who examined age-sex cohorts in the 1990 Chinese census found a very low male-to-female ratio among Tibetans who were 20 to 34 years old in 1960, indicating not famine but emigration and/or revolt-related deaths, which tend to disproportionately involve young males. Also no evidence exists of the hundreds of thousands of battle deaths claimed by the émigrés. Their assertion that 87,000 Tibetans died in central-western Tibet in the 1959 uprising is not credible. The uprising was largely confined to Lhasa, and no widespread destruction occurred in the city, whose population was only 40,000.

The émigrés also assert that China is using “ethnic swamping” and family planning to exterminate Tibetans as a people. Their formula is: population transfer + coercive birth control = cultural genocide. An echo of this charge can be found in United States Secretary of State Colin Powell's January 2001 statement that the “Chinese sending more and more Chinese in to settle Tibet . . . seems to be a policy that might well destroy that society.” Scholars and the United States government have recognized, however, that the vast majority of migrants to Tibet come at their own initiative and are second-class citizens in Tibet because their status is that of nonresidents or temporary residents, which deprives them of most social welfare rights.

The Reagan-era United States State Department termed the émigré discourse on migration to Tibet “inaccurate, incomplete, and misleading.” Most misleading is the assertion that 7.5 million non-Tibetans outnumber 6 million Tibetans in Tibetan areas. This is a statistical trick based on including in Tibet areas at the eastern edge of the Eastern Plateau that have long been mainly non-Tibetan, especially Xining City and adjacent areas. These have not been ruled by ethnic Tibetans for a thousand years and had non-Tibetan majorities decades before the Communists came to power. Apart from these regions, about half the Eastern Plateau population was ethnic Tibetan in 1990. In the TAR (the Central-Western Plateau), the 2000 census revealed that 2.41 million of the 2.61 million people who had resided there for six months or longer were ethnic Tibetans, up 15 percent from 1990. Tibetans thus comprise 92 percent of the TAR total, while Han are 5.9 percent and other ethnicities 1.9 percent. Taking into account very recent migrants and army deployments, ethnic Tibetans exceed 85

percent of the TAR population. Perhaps 2.2 million non-Tibetans lived in all People's Republic Tibetan areas in 1990, out of a total population of about 6.5 million. Yet émigré sources vie with one another in exaggerating the number of non-Tibetans, with some claiming that 1.7 million to 2 million Han live in the TAR alone, and 638,000 in Lhasa. Most non-Tibetan migrants moreover are plebian and plan on returning home after accumulating some savings. Their social profile and impermanence greatly contrast with the characteristics of colonial settlers.

The émigrés also assert that there were 6 million Tibetans in 1950, the same number as today, with “demographic annihilation” and family planning the causes of population stagnation. In fact, there were likely not many more than 2.5 million Tibetans in 1950. The Dalai Lama's advisory council stated in a message to the UN in 1950 that Tibetans barely exceeded 3 million. The Panchen Lama (the second-highest Tibetan Buddhist leader), Britain's last diplomat in Lhasa, and proindependence American scholars have written of some 3 million Tibetans around 1950. The 1953 Chinese census, which involved a rough guess, not a true enumeration, stated that there were 2.75 million Tibetans. By 1990 the number had increased to 4.6 million, and there are doubtless more than 5.2 million today. Far from suffering population stagnation, the number of Tibetans has doubled in the past 50 years.

Émigré leaders speak of discriminatory birth-control practices affecting Tibetans. Limitations have been placed on family size in most Tibetan areas, but these are less onerous than in China proper. A former United States special coordinator for Tibetan issues noted that Tibetans receive preferential treatment in marriage and family-planning policies. The Tibet Information Network has stated that Chinese who work in the TAR face much stricter limits on family size than do Tibetans. In Tibetan areas outside the TAR, urban Tibetans can have two children and rural Tibetans can have three, while in the TAR, urban Tibetans can have two and rural Tibetans have no limits. Urban Han are limited to one child and to two in rural areas; there are, however, practically no rural Han in the TAR and few in other Tibetan areas. The fines for having extra children are much higher for Han than for Tibetans.

In China's “reform era” from 1979 to the present, the rate of population increase among Tibetans has been much higher than in China as a whole. This contrasts with colonialism, under which the colo-

nized perished in droves through famine and repression while colonial countries gained demographic benefits from colonialism. The claim of demographic catastrophe in Tibet is a mystification, but one that has had a hold even on Western scholars. The prominent sinologist Chalmers Johnson has, for example, compared what has happened in Tibet to what befell indigenous Americans after the arrival of the Europeans. But while Native Americans lost upward of 95 percent of their population, the Tibetans have proliferated on a scale never before experienced by that ethnic group.

CULTURAL GENOCIDE?

After the Dalai Lama left Tibet in 1959, he charged that the People's Republic had brought the danger of total destruction to Tibetans. The CIA-funded International Commission of Jurists took up the charge, arguing that China was eradicating the Tibetan people by restricting religion and thus destroying the basis of the Tibetan way of life. This claim of “cultural genocide” became a fixture of émigré discourse. The Dalai Lama often speaks of it, arguing that “there is an attempt to destroy the integral core of

State practices in Tibet do not amount to cultural genocide or ethnocide.

Tibetan civilization and identity.” He contends that China commits intentional cultural genocide because it controls and restricts Buddhist study (for example, by holding political study in monasteries and by allowing bilingual Tibet University students to be more successful than their monolingual Tibetan classmates by earning better grades and getting better jobs). China also commits unintentional cultural genocide by population transfer and sinicization policies that result in more Han artisans and shopkeepers in Lhasa and Tibetans who speak Chinese among themselves in public, eat rice rather than barley, and behave in an unruly manner.

Cultural genocide is said to flow from Western concepts of culturally homogenous nation-states, but the concept dates only to the late 1940s. Polish-born legal expert Raphael Lemkin, who coined the term “genocide,” sought a ban on cultural genocide. The ban aimed not at policies that assimilate a group into a larger society, but at drastic methods used to aid a rapid and complete disappearance of the cultural and religious life of a group. Communist and Middle Eastern states proposed at the UN that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provide that minorities may have their own educational, cultural, and religious institutions and use their own languages in public and in dealings with the state. The Genocide

Convention would concomitantly bar “any deliberate act committed with the intent to destroy the language, religion or cultural of a national, racial or religious group.” These efforts were scuttled in the UN by Unites States–led Western states.

Although not embodied in rights instruments or customary law, the concept of cultural genocide is widely discussed and examples adduced. Some scholars equate it with ethnocide—the destruction of a group’s right to enjoy, develop, and disseminate its own culture and language—conceiving of both as destruction of a traditional culture, with or without killing the people who live it. Others hold that genocide must entail mass murder and—despite the preferences of some scholars—intent as well, while with ethnocide a group disappears without its murder, and intent is irrelevant. The term “ethnocide” has been applied both to scenarios where forced assimilation and other intentional acts are carried out as well as to those where no intent to harm the group is apparent. Article 7 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that such populations have the collective and individual right not to be subjected to ethnocide and cultural genocide.

The draft declaration seeks to protect the world’s 300 million indigenous people, not the much more numerous ethnic minorities, and it applies only to people recognized as indigenous by their states. China, like most Asian states, declares that it only has ethnic minorities. UN and state practice designates indigenous peoples only in Oceania, the Americas, and Australasia. Even scholars sympathetic to the émigré cause are uncertain that Tibetans come under the indigenous rubric, and the émigrés have never sought to take the indigenous route, seeing it as conflicting with their claim that Tibet is an occupied state. The international law on cultural genocide and ethnocide, which concerns only indigenous people, thus does not apply to Tibetans.

Even if special scrutiny is needed because Tibetans are a “pre-existing nationality,” if not an indigenous one, state practices in Tibet do not amount to cultural genocide or ethnocide. No intentional destruction of Tibetan culture has been shown. Even during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, religion was attacked throughout China and, as pro-Tibet-independence Tibetologist Elliot Sperling argues, Tibetan culture cannot be reduced to religion. He also observes that “within certain limits the People’s Republic of China does

make efforts to accommodate Tibetan cultural expression” and the “cultural activity taking place all over the Tibetan plateau cannot be ignored.”⁴

FORCED ASSIMILATION?

Language is a central element of culture and in China, minority tongues are seen as preserving ethnic cultures; the Han idiom (*putonghua*) is viewed as a bridge to the urban areas. Chinese law states that minorities in autonomous areas (where 98 percent of Tibetans live) enjoy the freedom to speak their own languages. These areas are to employ local languages in instruction while teaching *putonghua* from upper primary or lower middle school grades, and to develop minority-language mass media. In the late 1980s, the TAR issued regulations on the use of Tibetan that specified that Tibetan was to be taught at the primary and secondary levels.

Except for a few people living at edge of the plateau, Tibetans continue to speak their mother tongue and, according to scholar Regie Stites, “Tibetans with anything beyond a rudimentary grasp of *putonghua* comprise a very small portion of the total population.” No recent work on endangered languages deems Tibetan to be imperiled. Language maintenance among Tibetans contrasts with language loss in even remote areas of Western countries renowned for liberal policies. In the United States, all indigenous languages are now extinct in California, French is heading that way in southern Louisiana, and other “ethnic” languages face official and popular hostility elsewhere in the country.

In most minority areas of China, including Tibet, local languages are used in grade schools, with *putonghua* used as a second language. Claims that primary schools in Tibet now teach in *putonghua* are in error. Tibetan is the main language of instruction in 98 percent of TAR primary schools, while *putonghua* is introduced in the early grades only in urban schools. Many parents want instruction to be in *putonghua* for the (mainly urban) children who go on to middle school; thus the TAR regulation that requires that middle schools use Tibetan has not been enforced. In 1999, however, secondary school Tibetan-language texts were introduced in the TAR and Tibetans now comprise about 50 percent of TAR secondary school teachers. In eastern Tibetan areas, parents can often choose the language of primary education, and secondary education is available in Tibetan.

Bilingualism is also promoted by policies that require that all laws, official notices, and commercial signs be bilingual; that allow Tibetans to interact with government in their own language; and that have created mass media with substantial Tibetan

⁴Elliot Sperling, “Exile and Dissent: The Historical and Cultural context,” in Melissa Harris and Sydney Jones, eds., *Tibet since 1950: Silence, Prison, or Exile* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2000), pp. 31–36.

components. Official policies in Tibet go beyond the respect for minority languages required by international law or practiced in European “rights-based” states. Most of these states have not ratified the European minority languages treaty, even though its obligations are fairly minimal (in education, it is satisfied by making available preschool education in minority languages).

Apart from language, religion is often said to be at the core of Tibetan culture. The 46,000 monks in the TAR are, as a percentage of adult males, more numerous than monks in all other Buddhist lands and far exceed the density of priests in Catholic Poland and Ireland. (Indeed, there are only 45,000 priests among America’s 61 million Roman Catholics.) China does limit the number of monks, but so too did the Dalai Lama when he was in power. In old Tibet, most monks were sent to monasteries by their parents at 7 to 10 years of age without regard to their wishes. It may not be unreasonable for the authorities today, when there are many more schools, to allow only adults to become monks. The degree of regulation of religion—whether to allow the display of Dalai Lama portraits and to conduct political campaigns in monasteries—mainly depends on the authorities’ perception of the degree of local separatist sentiment; thus a more liberal attitude can be found in the eastern Tibetan areas than in the TAR. Increased separatist activity that may be linked to the émigrés or the seeming successes of the émigré internationalization campaign typically generates tightened regulation of the monasteries through expulsions and political study sessions.

The émigrés also try to associate “vices” in Tibet’s cities with cultural corrosion due to the Han presence. Billiards, however, is a Western invention, karaoke was born in Japan, and prostitution and drugs are universals. Some of these vices are found also in Dharamsala, the Tibetan émigré capital, in Kathmandu and other cities in the region, and among Buddhist monks elsewhere. “Cultural erosion,” such as the adoption of words of foreign origin, is ongoing in Dharamsala as much as it is in Lhasa and is not necessarily negative. Why, when émigré and Western leaders object to Han cultural influence in Tibet, are they not concerned also about the effects of Western influence on traditional culture there?

Finally, it should be noted that there is a Tibetan-ruled Himalayan kingdom where minorities are

required by law to speak the national language and must wear in public the dominant people’s traditional dress. This forced assimilation is a factor in tens of thousands of minority people fleeing the kingdom. The Tibetan émigrés have not however criticized this “cultural genocide” and have friendly relations with Bhutan.

DEMYSTIFYING TIBET

The émigrés are not alone in mystifying the Tibet question. The Chinese government’s claims that old Tibet had the most vicious feudal society the world has known and that the émigrés intend to reinstate feudalism are off the mark. Those myths are mirrored by the émigré portrayal of old Tibet as composed of a contented, healthy, and rigorously educated people and by the idea that the émigré administration is a democracy. The Dalai Lama in fact is the dominant, lifelong “supreme

spiritual and temporal leader” according to the charter of the Tibetans in exile. The physical intimidation of political and religious dissidents

in the émigré community and their branding as “Chinese agents” have also been reported.

Beijing’s myths about Tibet and its uncritical discourse of progress there are credited only in China. The émigré myth is pervasive in the West and is an obstacle to a negotiated settlement of the Tibet question. Its acceptance causes politicians—with the United States Congress never outdone—to repeatedly issue statements that lead China to conclude that negotiations over Tibet are useless because the Dalai Lama heads a plot to push China to disintegration; in his words to “go the Russian way.” Indeed, the émigrés lead an “Allied Committee” that includes Tibetan, Uighur, and Mongol separatists, although Chinese Communist Party leaders in Tibet do recognize that the Dalai Lama is not necessarily wedded to the hardline émigré anti-China faction.

As the myths surrounding the Tibetan cause are challenged by Western and Chinese scholars, the émigré leaders may come to reconsider their long-standing claim that a largely independent, pan-Tibetan polity is inevitable. At the same time, China’s leaders may eventually confront the self-delusion that because the Tibet question will end with the Dalai Lama, a compromise settlement is unnecessary. A process of demystification on both sides is a precondition for successful negotiations. ■

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to a negotiated settlement of the Tibet question.*
