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## Back to Reality on Tibet

Thursday 1 May 2008 by [Andrew Martin Fischer](#)

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When wide-scale protests broke out in Tibet in March 2008, the world suddenly paid attention to this little understood region of Inner Asia the size of Western Europe. This attention has since been diverted by pro-Tibet demonstrations and Chinese counter-demonstrations, both focused on the Olympics. In the resulting clamour, fable is increasingly reigning over fact. In particular, the assertion that 'Tibet was, is and always will be part of China' reflects very little historical understanding. While Chinese sensitivities about a western media bias are understandable, we must, in turn, beware of a Chinese media bias. We must seek the real Tibet amidst the rampant stereotypes.

There is not much contention over basic facts among serious scholars of Tibet. It was only in the mid-20th century that the Chinese state first became directly involved in the social and economic management of Tibetan areas. The Tibet Autonomous Region, which accounts for just under half of the total Tibetan areas in China, has effectively been an occupied territory since the 1950 invasion by the Peoples' Liberation Army, in the sense that it has been ruled directly by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through force rather than consent, and from Beijing rather than from Lhasa. This situation had never come to pass throughout all of the previous ebbs and flows of various empires emanating from China. Similarly, many of the grievances that underlie the current protests in Tibet, from economic marginalisation to political subordination and social humiliation, are typical to other situations of occupation around the world.

China has undoubtedly been the usher of economic and human development in Tibet, such as rapid growth since the mid-1990s, improved infrastructure, falling mortality, and rising living standards, life expectancy and education. But pointing to these as justifications for occupation

recalls earlier European apologists for colonialism, such as the British socialist Bill Warren. He argued that western capitalist penetration into Africa, Asia and Latin America was definitely progressive given that it destroyed pre-capitalist cultures and modes of production and implanted cultural and economic elements of modern civilisation.

The counterargument is that similar modern achievements could have been made under entirely different political frameworks. For instance, the Bhutanese have achieved very similar levels of human development as in Tibet, except with internal political independence. Of course, Bhutan is heavily subsidised by India, just as Tibet is subsidised by China. There is no doubt that these remote peripheries of modern capitalism are doomed to be deficit regions, perpetually dependent on subsidies from an overlord, if only because they are agrarian economies facing constantly declining terms of trade.

The Indian arrangement with Bhutan – Indian subsidies in exchange for Indian control over Bhutan's external relations and border security, while preserving Bhutan's independence over its own internal affairs – is essentially what the Dalai Lama has been asking for Tibet since the early 1980s. This is similar to the arrangement agreed between representatives of the Dalai Lama and the Chinese Communists in 1951, and to the arrangement between Lhasa and the Manchu Empire in the late 18th century, after which Tibet was closed to the West for most of the 19th century.

Yet despite these precedents, a comparable arrangement now seems far too much for the CCP to concede, given that it has already been intricately involved in micro-managing almost all aspects of Tibetan society and economy since the Dalai Lama escaped in 1959, and even before in the Tibetan areas outside the control of Lhasa. Subsequently, Tibetan rural society was completely re-engineered twice in thirty years, first through collectivisation in the 1950s and 1960s, and then through decollectivisation in the 1980s. Decollectivisation was undoubtedly welcome across Tibet given that collectivisation was intensely unpopular. Indeed, it was collectivisation, and not Chinese rule per se, that incited the large scale armed uprising in eastern Tibet in the mid 1950s.

In the process, China claims to have wiped out theocracy, feudalism and slavery in Tibet. However, there never was systemised slavery in the traditional Tibetan society that was obliterated by these seismic historical events. It is also wrong to characterise old Tibet as feudal. It was certainly not theocratic, given that Buddhists do not believe in God. There was a system of labour and land management in Central Tibet that was roughly comparable to manorial serfdom, insofar as peasants were hereditarily tied to land held by nobles and monasteries and to whom they owed various services. However, the eastern Tibetan rangelands were largely ruled through tribal systems.



Rather, the modern CCP terminology of feudalism, theocracy and slavery bears little relation to Tibet. Instead, it draws from Marxist theories of ethnicity that were elaborated by Stalin in the 1930s and then later adapted to China by the CCP. Accordingly, ethnic and religious identities were considered to be manifestations of lower stages of historical material development that will presumably recede under material and scientific progress. It was argued that this is best achieved in the Tibetan areas by opening them up to the more advanced regions of China and allowing for the dissemination of rationality and technology. Much to the frustration of many Tibetan and Chinese scholars in China, public presentations on Tibet from within China still remain heavily constrained by this official ideology.

Indeed, minority nationalities have been a constant thorn in the backside for modern Chinese nationalism even prior to the Communists. The demise of the Manchu Empire in the early 20th century left the emerging Nationalist movement in China with a paradox; they rejected the legitimacy of imperial rule, although they simultaneously argued for maintaining the borders of the Manchu Empire and its satellites despite the fact that these borders could not be legitimated along nationalist lines, given that early Chinese nationalism was undeniably Han and had little resonance among Tibetans and Uighurs.

In order to resolve this paradox, Han nationalists re-conceptualised these imperial satellites as parts of an invented national tradition (à la Eric Hobsbawm). Adapting earlier imperial ideologies, China was described as a nation of five nationalities; the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Tibetan and Uighur. The latter four were probably chosen over others, such as the larger Hui Muslim, Miao or Zhuang minorities, because they were key to staking out the non-Han satellite regions of the Manchu Empire, and thus to creating an ideology that legitimated their inclusion

into the emerging Chinese Republic. This was later elaborated by the Communists in the 1950s into the current 56 ethnic nationalities, in an exercise of 'scientific' categorisation that resembled the early uses of anthropology by European colonists, except with the additional overtone of Marxism.

This paradox of modern Chinese nationalism is perhaps one of the reasons why the recognition of Tibet and Xinjiang as parts of China since a distant historical past is so sensitive in China.

Ideological problems aside, once the Communists won the civil war in China in 1949, Tibet and Xinjiang were quickly subjugated. Tibet then entered the havoc of radicalising Maoism in China. The eastern Tibetan areas were particularly hard hit by counter-insurgency in the mid-1950s and the famine of the Great Leap Forward from 1959-61. Following these debacles, the government turned to policies of heavily subsidising the Tibetan areas in the 1960s and 1970s, reversed this policy in the 1980s, and then returned again to intensive subsidisation in the mid-1990s.

The current challenges in Tibet are found in this history of political subjugation combined with the heightened degree of economic and social polarization generated by the latest phase of intense subsidisation since the mid-1990s. This has resulted in strong ethnically-exclusionary dynamics within development, which I have analysed in detail in other articles. Suffice it to say here that local initiatives and locally generated investment and accumulation play a very minute role in the overall processes of economic change in the Tibetan areas. In the tense political environment, they may have even been discouraged. In the Tibet Autonomous Region in particular, where subsidisation has reached its zenith with the recent construction of the railway to Lhasa, the local Tibetan population has been rendered more or less irrelevant as agents causing growth. Meaningful decentralization has simply not taken place in Tibet the way it has in most other areas of China during the reform period.

Lack of agency within development exacerbates a feeling of alienation despite all of the monumental change and pockets of affluence. The policies that guide development in the Tibet have been essentially promulgated from Beijing as top-down dictates, following the trends of national development policy. Policies are then, effectively or ineffectively, implemented by local authorities, themselves appointed by Beijing, with the assistance of a corps of professionals and cadres from around the country on terms of duty that usually last two to three years. Elite Tibetans often make up a large share of local-level government officials, although rarely at the most senior positions or with any substantive power. Due to the fiscal monopoly of Beijing and the political and security paranoia that grips the Tibetan areas, these local Tibetan officials mostly toe the line set out from above. And even these privileged Tibetans must face regular humiliation, in the form of an evermore-confident sense of Han chauvinism, from their Chinese superiors.

In this light, it is true that the CCP has spent much money in Tibet, but not necessarily on Tibetans. Most of the subsidies have been spent through Chinese state-owned corporations or via the administrative apparatus of the state itself. This might add up to good national industrial strategy, in much the same way that tied international aid from the US or the EU supports many US and EU commercial interests, but it is often of questionable use to the needs of the local population and reinforces an extreme form of dependency. Some argue that the show should go on because trickle down is nonetheless improving the livelihoods of many rural households. However, we must ask whether a better alternative is possible.

Along these lines, many Tibetan officials and scholars who I interviewed in China argued in private that whatever China spends in Tibet goes back to itself. Once this boomerang aid is deducted from the subsidy equation, the small amount that actually reaches Tibetans, in the form of salaries, poverty assistance, agricultural development, limited healthcare, education, and so forth, could quite possibly be funded through local resources, particularly if mining activities were taxed and spent by local governments. They argued that similar if not better human development outcomes could be achieved in this manner, all things considered.

While it is true that Tibet embarked on modern development following Chinese occupation in 1950, it would not have necessarily remained static in the absence of Chinese rule. More likely, it would have embarked on its own process of modernization as with all the countries of Asia, the path of which can only be speculated. One thing is certain; the Tibetan economy of the late 1940s and its elites would have served as a starting point for an autonomous economic transition, possibly aided by China or other countries in exchange for relinquishing some sovereignty. In this light, the question that is probably on the minds of most of the Tibetans who were recently demonstrating in Tibet was; development yes, but at what cost?

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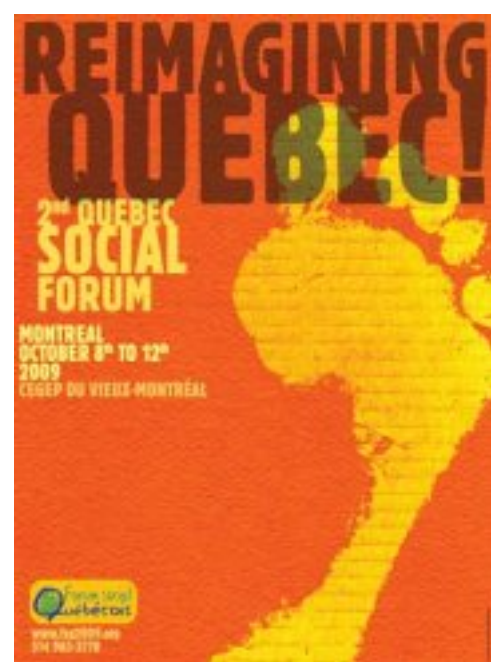
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