

Tibet: History and Geopolitics. Mao Zedong's Legacy

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Considering its size, prestige and historical value, Tibet is another region within China's frontiers of a vital nature to Beijing. Tibet in fact has a centuries-long association with mainland China; and, in modern history, was ruled from a distance by China's authorities following the 1720 Chinese expedition to Tibet. This military operation was ordered by China's long-ruling Qing dynasty, so as to expel the Mongol Dzungars from the area, and reinstate Beijing's authority over Tibet.

For almost two centuries from 1720, Tibet was under the sway of China's authorities, up to a point. By 1903 and 1904 Western intrusion in Tibet, from the British Empire, broke Beijing's limited influence on the area. British forces entered the Tibetan capital Lhasa during early August 1904, in a campaign where their forces killed up to 3,000 Tibetans, who were poorly armed and equipped.

The Manchu-led Qing dynasty, which had governed China since 1644, was by then in difficulty and its complete collapse arrived in 1912. For the next four decades until 1949, China entered one of the greatest periods of decline in its history – as the country was dominated by the imperial powers of Britain, Japan, and the most powerful of them, the United States.



Nevertheless US power would suffer a serious blow with China's independence in 1949. From the early 1950s Mao Zedong's attitude to Tibet, and that of his successors, was not to eradicate its inhabitants' way of life, nor indeed to colonise the region. The English scholar

Prof. Robert Barnett, a notable specialist in Tibetan history, wrote that,

“If we try to envisage the perspective of Chinese officials and the CCP [China’s Communist Party] toward Tibet over the last 60 years, what we see for the most part is not an effort to destroy or attack Tibetan culture, as some critics have alleged, but the opposite: a long series of ‘gifts’, interrupted only by what the party now describes as the ‘errors’ of the Cultural Revolution [1966-1976]”.
(1)

Mao furnished the Tibetan leadership with offerings, and in return expected their obedience and respect when required, while he refrained from directly meddling in their internal affairs. The opening gift bestowed by Mao’s government on Tibet, according to Prof. Barnett, “was that of liberation in 1950” (2). Following this, as he outlined, came “the gift of class struggle and the accompanying dispensing of land” in 1959 to the Tibetan peasantry. Then “regional autonomy” was introduced in Tibet by 1965 (Tibet Autonomous Region), and a classless society the next year. Subsequent to Mao’s death in 1976, further gifts were granted, but the nature of them altered with the shift in ideological leanings in China’s capital.



Beijing’s experienced reformist politician, Deng Xiaoping, became the country’s outright leader by 1978. Tibet was granted a household economy in 1980, stability in 1990, the market economy in 1992, and infrastructural projects were enacted by 2006 such as pertaining to housing (3). As part of the Great Western Development Strategy launched early this century, Chinese governments have sought to bridge the gap between eastern and western China. In Tibet, China’s authorities have overseen the construction and extension of airports, highways and railroads such as the Qinghai-Tibet railway, the world’s highest and costing the equivalent of \$4.2 billion. It connects the Tibetan capital Lhasa 1,200 miles eastwards to central China.

Beijing has instituted wide-scale health care and educational programs in Tibet, leading to the construction of hundreds of medical centres, hospitals and schools. Following the communist accession to power, the average life expectancy of a Tibetan citizen has almost doubled, from 35 years in 1950 to 68 years over six decades later (4). As of late 2017, according to Tibet’s education department 2,200 schools of all levels were in operation across Tibet; with close to 700,000 students attending, more than 20% of Tibet’s entire population.

The Tibetan populace today remains surprisingly small at just over three million, considering its status as the second largest region in China, behind neighbouring Xinjiang. Like each Chinese province, living standards and cultural tolerance has “improved extremely rapidly” in Tibet during the past four decades, spurred on by investment initiatives implemented by Beijing (5). At least in GDP terms Tibet remains the poorest area of China. Around 80% of Tibetans currently reside in rural areas and make a living from agriculture, where overall earnings are low. Yet, over the past generation, the average per capita income of a rural Tibetan has increased substantially, from under \$100 in 1992 to \$1,525 by 2017. (6)

Tibet and the Plateau which bears its name has enormous planetary importance. Over 25% of the world’s human population are dependent upon fresh water continually delivered to them, by major rivers like the Yangtze and Mekong, whose sources are traced to the Tibetan Plateau’s glaciers. However, due to unchecked climate change, these glaciers have been diminishing for decades resulting in less available fresh water for humans.

Water scarcity, along with poor water quality, is already having repercussions for the two billion people reliant on Tibet’s life-giving resources. Hundreds of millions of these affected people live in nuclear-armed states like China, India and Pakistan, with the possibility of conflict erupting over water shortages. There could be a situation whereby climate change induces a nuclear war, humanity’s two biggest threats, our pincers, combining to influence each other. Tibet, which holds the largest amount of frozen fresh water outside of the poles, lost 27% of its glacier ice cover between the documented years 1970 and 2010. (7)

Tibet has considerable strategic and political significance, partly because it shares a lengthy border with India – a country led since 2014 by Narendra Modi, an extremist politician who has been dismantling Indian secular democracy and silencing critical voices. Under Modi, India’s relations with America and president Donald Trump are particularly close. The US and Indian armed forces have recently been conducting joint military exercises, meant somewhat as a warning to China.



It is hardly surprising India's relations with China have deteriorated so much. The Trump administration has provided strong public support to India during the ongoing Himalayan border disputes, in which casualties were inflicted on both India and China in June 2020. The two states are now bolstering their forces along the contested Himalayan regions, meaning further clashes could occur in weeks to come. Tibet's people can only look on, and hope that nothing deadly unfolds between nuclear powers.

Tibet's paltry human population is mainly due to the area's remote and rugged terrain, along with an average altitude of 4,500 metres above sea level. Instead, Tibet contains more wildlife than anywhere else in China, home to large mammals from Himalayan wolves and brown bears to lynx and even Bengal tigers, which were photographed in Tibet last year for the first time.

Ethnic Tibetans comprise about 90% of people residing in the region, with 8% of Tibet's remaining populace made up of Han Chinese, along with smaller numbers of Hui, Mongols, etc. The vast majority of the population adhere to Tibetan Buddhism, which was first introduced to Tibet in the 8th century.

In May 1951, the Tibetan government signed a surrender document (Seventeen Point Agreement) in which they consented to officially become part of China, recognising Beijing's sovereignty over their territory, but the Tibetan government would retain a great level of power regarding their own affairs. Prof. Barnett noted, "This was a policy of exceptionalism, according to which Tibet was to be treated quite differently from the rest of China and given the gift of continuing, unreformed governance and society, with a treaty-like document to confirm its status. It was unlike anything else in Chinese Communist history until the arrangement with Hong Kong 30 years later". (8)

In 1951, the Harry Truman administration offered modest US military support to the Tibetan

government. The Dalai Lama's advisers rejected these early proposals as being "too tentative and unreliable". The US Congress, then and now, considers Tibet a landmass occupied by China and which has the right to self-determination, overlooking Tibet's long association with mainland China.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, succeeding Truman in 1953, significantly increased US backing for Tibet's separatist forces. In 1956 the CIA began providing covert assistance to Tibetan insurgents and, that very year, their incitement helped to instigate several rebellions in the Kham and Amdo regions of eastern Tibet (9). The revolts were eventually suppressed by Beijing, but in Kham the unrest continued until 1962. CIA destabilisation methods in Tibet – with the assistance of other secret agents from the special services of Nepal and India – played a role in the March 1959 US-supported Tibetan uprising against Chinese control, which descended into an unmitigated fiasco for the rebels.

Mao, enraged by what he perceived as a lack of gratitude by Tibet's leadership for his lenient strategy, ordered that the rebellion be crushed. Over the course of just a fortnight it was all over, resulting in many thousands of casualties for the Tibetans. The Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso), who received funding from the CIA for years, fled Tibet to India in late March 1959 and still lives there today. When US relations with China warmed slightly in the early 1970s, all American support for Tibet's separatists quickly ended, leaving them embittered.

Yet from the early 1980s until today, US governments resumed and continue to channel cash to Tibetan opposition groups and exile organisations. Some of this money is funnelled through the US State Department branch, the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, along with support forthcoming from the US government funded National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The Trump administration is providing many millions of dollars to Tibetan separatist causes. In the year 2019 alone Washington dispensed with \$17 million to Tibet's "independence" goals, extending to Tibetan-linked groups based in India and Nepal. (10)

Regarding Mao's 27 year reign, Western historical and media accounts claim he was directly responsible for the deaths of tens of million during the Great Leap Forward, which lasted from 1958 to 1962, but hard evidence is lacking regarding the exact loss of life. Seldom mentioned is that in the Korean War a decade earlier, the US military assault on North Korea killed 20% of its nine million population (11). In per capita terms, this is a considerably higher death rate than anything attributable to the Great Leap Forward.

There are also mitigating circumstances involved relating to the loss of life in China, and Mao's influence that is supposedly to blame entirely for it. In the late 1950s and into 1960, more than a third of all China's cultivated land was experiencing the worst drought in a century (12). These affected crops, amounting to 100 million acres of farmland, ultimately failed and the national grain harvest plummeted.

In the heavily populated Shandong province of eastern China, eight of its 12 main rivers had completely dried up by 1960, an indication of the drought's astonishing severity. China's Yellow River not far to the south of Beijing, the sixth longest river on earth, had dropped so low by mid-1960 that men could comfortably wade across

its lower reaches. This had not been seen before. On the outskirts of Beijing, China's best supplied city, people were forced to eat tree bark and weeds.

To compound matters, in 1961 record-breaking floods arrived in China that washed away more arable land. A further 50 million acres were wiped out (13). Some of this flooding in China during 1961 is yet to have its record broken. The extreme climatic events added to a death toll that would have been appreciably smaller, but for these weather phenomenon, which Mao had no control over and could not foresee.

It was Mao's dream for a universal raising of the living standards for China's people, an unrealistic utopian project, which contributed to the tragedy that afflicted China in the late 50s/early 60s. (14)

Another factor in the Great Leap Forward's humanitarian disaster was the Sino-Soviet split – one of the Cold War's major episodes – as personal relations soured between Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev and Mao, at the root of which were ideological disagreements. In June 1960, Khrushchev took the step of publicly denouncing Mao as “an ultra-Leftist, an ultra-dogmatist and a Left revisionist”. In response Beijing's First Secretary, Peng Zhen, rebuked Khrushchev for his “patriarchal, arbitrary and tyrannical” behaviour.

For much of the 1950s, China's largest trading partner was the Soviet Union. Trade between these neighbours peaked in 1959, equivalent to over 45% of China's foreign investment. In July 1960, as drought and famine tightened its grip in China, a spiteful Khrushchev terminated all Russian aid to the Chinese, withdrawing almost 1,400 Soviet technicians from the country. This left many factories half-constructed in China that the Russian experts had been overseeing, and other research projects were also abandoned. The loss of Soviet assistance to China was sorely felt. Short recognised, “the Soviet action inflicted enormous economic damage at a time when China was least able to deal with it”.

Focusing on the health care programs, the average life expectancy of a Chinese person in 1949 was less than 40 years. By the mid-1970s, Chinese citizens were living for over a quarter of a century longer on average, reaching 66 years of age (15). It ranks as among the most rapid rises of average life expectancy in global history. This was no coincidence, as it had indeed been made possible because of the Mao government's nationwide health care plans – which saved as many as 100 million lives by comparison to India during the same period from 1949 to 1979, encompassing almost all of Mao's tenure. (16)

An independent study revealed how, “Mao Zedong aggressively promoted health improvement in rural areas, establishing the first of many ‘multisectoral’ initiatives for health” (17). This included prompt and successful efforts by Beijing to vaccinate China's population against killer diseases such as cholera, polio, smallpox, scarlet fever, etc. Smallpox for example, endemic in China for centuries, was virtually eradicated over a three year period in the early 1960s, while noted advances were made in improving water quality, sanitation and nutrition.

During Mao's entire reign, between 82% to 89% of China's population resided in the countryside. As a consequence, the Maoist rural health care strategies benefited the nation's masses, and those least well off, which is borne out by the above figures. The Mao government's health projects extended to China's cities, with an early campaign

in the 1950s against tuberculosis (TB), another deadly illness, before the effort to wipe out TB was later expanded to rural areas.

Notes

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- 2 Ibid., Second Edition (Oxford University Press; 2nd edition, 11 April 2014) p. 405
- 3 Ibid., Third Edition, p. 461
- 4 Shannon Tiezzi, "China attacks Dalai Lama in New White Paper on Tibet", [The Diplomat](#), 16 April 2015
- 5 *Politics in China*, Third Edition, p. 471
- 6 Ibid., p. 475
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- 8 *Politics in China*, Second Edition, p. 409
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- 13 Ibid., p. 504
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