

What is Tibet? – Fact and Fancy

[Excerpt from M.C. Goldstein. “Change, Conflict and Continuity among a community of nomadic pastoralists—A Case Study from western Tibet, 1950-1990.” In *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, eds. Barnett and Akiner. London: Hurst & Co., 1994.]

Ethnic Tibetan populations are distributed over an area as vast as Western Europe. They are found not only in the Tibet Autonomous Region (of China), the traditional heartland of political Tibet, but also in parts of the neighbouring Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan and Xinjiang, as well as in parts of other nations such as India (Ladakh, Sikkim, Northern Uttar Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh), Northern Nepal and Bhutan. Although all of these regions were once united under the rule of the early kings of Tibet, during the eleven centuries following the breakup of that kingdom in the 9th century many of the regions on the periphery became independent or fell under the authority of neighbouring states.

The detailed history of all of these peripheral areas is not well documented in the literature on Tibet, and this introduction will not attempt to consider each of them. Rather, it will be limited to those most relevant to this discussion, namely, the easternmost extension of ethnic Tibetan populations – the two major sub-ethnic regions known in Tibetan and Kham and Amdo.

The ‘modern’ Sino-Tibetan border in these two regions was generally established during the mid-18th century when the Tibetan Government lost political control over most of these areas to Manchu (Qing) China. While the Tibetan Government has never accepted the loss of these regions as permanent or *de jure* – for example it claimed all of Kham and Amdo in the Simla Convention of 1913-14 – most of these areas in fact were not a part of its polity for the two centuries preceding the rise to power of the Communists in China in 1949. Consequently, the convention used in Tibetan historiography in the West has been to differentiate analytically between the political entity Tibet and other areas outside it where ethnic Tibetans lived.

For example, Hugh Richardson, the well-known British diplomat and historian, for practical purposes differentiated the Tibetan world into two categories. Following the work of Sir Charles Bell, he used the term ‘political’ Tibet for the polity ruled by the Dalai Lamas, and the term ‘ethnographic’ Tibet for other areas such as Amdo and Kham which were outside that state. He explained his rationale as follows:

In ‘political’ Tibet the Tibetan government have ruled *continuously* from the earliest times down to 1951. The region beyond that to the north and east [Amdo and Kham]... is its ‘ethnographic’ extension which people of Tibetan race once inhabited exclusively and where they are still in the majority. In that wider area, ‘political’ Tibet exercised jurisdiction *only in certain places and at irregular intervals*; for the most part, local lay or monastic chiefs were in control of districts of varying size. From the 18th century onwards the region was subject to sporadic Chinese infiltration. But in whatever hands actual authority might lie, the religious influence of Lhasa was a long-standing and all-pervasive force and large donations of money and valuable goods were annually sent to the Dalai Lama... In the text that follows Tibet means ‘political’ Tibet except where otherwise stated.... (Richardson, pp. 1-2; emphasis added.)

The convention used by Richardson, therefore, is simple and straightforward. The term ‘Tibet’ refers to the political state ruled by the Dalai Lamas; it does not refer to the ethnic border areas such as Amdo and Kham which were not part of that state in modern times, let alone to Ladakh or Northern Nepal. Until

recently, this convention was, as far as I can discern, universally accepted in the scholarly literature.¹

Nowadays, however, this convention is increasingly being abandoned in favour of what seems to me to be a political definition of Tibet that includes all of the ethnic Tibetan areas of the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan under the rubric 'Tibet'. In this perspective, an event said to have occurred in 'Tibet' in the 1980s (or 1940s or 1840s) may well have occurred in areas not part of the polity Tibet, i.e. in 'ethnographic' Tibetan areas such as Amdo. The most striking example of the position is the contention that Tibet was invaded by China in 1949. This was the year, to be sure, when Amdo and the eastern part of Kham became part of Communist China, but were these areas then part of Tibet? And if they were not, is it valid to say that *Tibet* was invaded at that time?

Proponents of the view that Tibet was invaded in 1949 appear to believe that these areas were part of Tibet; they also appear to believe that this assertion is not only good politics, but also good history. Phintso Thonden, the former director of the Office of Tibet in New York, for example, suggests that these areas were part of the Tibetan state until the Chinese Communists conquered China:

Since China's invasion of and occupation of Tibet, the Chinese have *incorporated* the whole of Amdo and parts of Kham into the neighbouring Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Szechuan, Kansu and Yunnan – *leaving only* U-tsang and other parts of Kham as the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region [TAR]. This was done with the view that should Beijing be forced to give up its spoils in Tibet, it would give up only the TAR and hold on to the more economically valuable regions of Kham and Amdo....(Thonden, p. 12; emphasis added.)

Thonden, therefore, appears to be asserting that these areas were part and parcel of Tibet until the Chinese Communists invaded Tibet in his terms in 1949. However, in another part of his article he seems to contradict this by writing that the Central Tibetan Government may have temporarily lost control of some areas of Amdo and Kham in the 1930s and '40s (*ibid.*, p. 13). He implies that this was due to the death of the 13th Dalai Lama in 1933 and a subsequent weak interregnum government headed by regents.

My reading of modern Tibetan history suggests strongly that both of these assertions are incorrect. Kham and Amdo were not part of Tibet in 1949 and were not temporarily lost only in 1939-40. Thonden's article may be good politics, but it is bad history. Let me, therefore, discuss briefly the historical situation in Kham and Amdo.

Observations on the History of Kham and Amdo

Although the history of the numerous Amdowa and Khamba areas has yet to be seriously addressed, there are enough available data to construct a general sketch of their situation over the past 250 years.

The Manchu Dynasty dealt with minority peoples in a number of ways including military conquest and absorption, the establishment of military colonies and the confirmation of native officials under the well-known *T'u-ssu* (pinyin: *Tusi*) system. In the latter system, the hereditary elite of ethnic areas was loosely integrated into the imperial system through the granting of court titles. In return for this 'confirmation' of its right to rule its own peoples according to its own cultural laws and traditions, this elite was responsible for various tasks such as the taking of censuses, the collection of taxes and the keeping of peace. In many cases this situation amounted to virtual independence for these native states since the Manchu tendency was to avoid interfering with local affairs unless developments directly threatened imperial control of the area.² By and large, the *T'u-ssu* system was the strategy utilized by the Manchu Empire in Amdo and Eastern Kham when it intervened in these regions in the early 18th century.

Joseph Kolmas, in a study of Tibet and Manchu China, commented on the Manchu ascendancy in this area:

The Tibetan policy of the next Manchu Emperor, Yung-cheng (1723-1735), though inconsistent, brought many important changes in Sino-Tibetan relations. The financial difficulty of maintaining numerous government troops in so remote an area as Tibet led the Emperor to order the withdrawal of the imperial troops from Tibet in the first year of his reign (in 1723). It also proved expensive and inefficient to attempt to control Eastern Tibet by maintaining Manchu-Chinese Civil Magistrates as had been done sporadically after 1720. For this reason in 1725 it was decided to replace the cumbersome and unwieldy direct control of the border zone by a sensible and flexible form of protectorate...

In this connection also a new boundary was drawn between Szu-ch'uan [Sichuan] and Tibet (in 1727), formed by the Ning-ching-shan range dividing the waters of the Chin-sha River (the headwaters of the Yangtze) from those of the Lan-ts'ang River (Mekong). According to this settlement, the territory east of Ning-ching-shan was to be incorporated in China proper, but the administration was to be carried on by the local chieftains (T'u szu) under the nominal supervision of the Szu-ch'uan provincial authorities, whereas all territory westwards was to be administered by the Lhasa government.

Thus the territory Tibet, handed down almost unaltered through the previous centuries, underwent for the first time a drastic reduction in area. If we add the territory of A-mdo (Ch'ing-hai), separated from Tibet in 1724, then the original size of Tibet as a politico-geographical unit has been reduced almost by half. (Kolmas, pp. 41-2)

Petech's classic study of China and Tibet in the 18th century presents a similar account. For example, regarding the time of the Dzungar conquest of Lhasa in 1717, he wrote:

Thus far the Dsungars held only Lhasa and the country to the north of it. The situation in the rest of the country can be summarized thus: Western Tibet and gTsan were for the moment politically a no man's land soon to be galvanized into active resistance... K'ams [Kham] was practically independent of Lhasa under its great lamas, and Chinese political influence was growing stronger and stronger; Amdo and Kukonor were under the sway of Mongol chieftains under Chinese suzerainty. (Petech, p. 42)

The revolt [in Kokonor-Amdo] was repressed in ...1724. The emperor [of China] seized the occasion for establishing solidly his sovereignty in Kukonor, which became from that time onwards an integrant part of the Chinese dominion. (*Ibid.*, p. 85)

This, as mentioned above, did not mean that China actually exercised day-to-day administrative control in Amdo and Kham, or even collected taxes, but it does indicate that from the early 18th century the Tibetan Government, with only a few exceptions mentioned below, did not rule these areas. Cultural, religious and economic ties continued, but these 'native states', as the British called them, were not part of the Tibetan polity.

The well-known Tibetan scholar-politician, the late Tsipon Shakabpa, discussed this issue in a parallel fashion:

In 1722 the K'anghsi Emperor died and was succeeded by his son, who became known as Yung-cheng Emperor. In 1723 the new Manchu ruler began a policy of retrenchment. He withdrew the garrison from Lhasa, leaving the administration of central Tibet entirely in the hands of Tibetan officials, without any military support from the Manchus.

In the first year of the Yung-cheng Emperor's reign, Mongols in the Kokonor region, led by Chingwang Lozang Tenzin, a grandson of the Qoshot Gushri Khan, revolted against the Manchus. The rebellion was suppressed, and in early 1724, the Kokonor [Amdo] region was *integrated into the Manchu Empire*. (Shakabpa, p. 141; emphasis added.)

For the more recent periods, we are fortunate to have available several straightforward firsthand accounts of a number of different border regions in Qinghai and Sichuan in the early 20th century. One such account concerns the ethnically Amdowa native state called Choni (now part of Gansu Province). The author of this account, Robert Ekvall, was an American Protestant missionary who was born in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and lived in the Choni area from 1923 till 1935. His record of the history of the area parallels that presented above:

In the time of the Manchu dynasty, the entire region was administered by a viceroy of the Imperial Government. That portion of the country occupied by Chinese Muslims and some other, smaller, racial units was under traditional Chinese law. The Tibetans enjoyed almost complete independence and varying degrees of prestige. The Chone Prince ruled over the forty-eight 'banners' of one group of Tibetans; other Tibetan rulers or chiefs held grants or commissions – some of them hundreds of years old – from the Imperial [Manchu] government.

...Since the establishment of the Republic in 1912, changes have occurred. Although the region nominally owes allegiance to the Central Government of China, the administration has been split between Moslem and Chinese factions...the Chinese government has attempted to exercise considerably more power over the Tibetans than formerly. This has resulted in the establishment of a greater degree of control over the Tibetans along the border but has alienated those Tibetans who persistently maintained their independence, even enhancing that independence, which is combined with a half-wistful nostalgia for the days of the [Manchu] Empire. (Ekvall, pp. 6-7)

Ekvall's study focuses on what he saw as one of the most important issues of the day: the relationship between the ethnic Tibetans and the non-Tibetans living in the area (the Han [native Chinese] and the Hui [Chinese Muslims]). His study helps to clarify that issue but also leaves unanswered many questions regarding the precise nature of the political status of these areas *vis-à-vis* the Chinese Government. However, his work does demonstrate clearly that these areas were not then part of political Tibet.

Another Western first-hand observer, Hans Stubel, provides an account of the same region of Amdo. Like Ekvall, Stubel talks of an area which in 1936 was inhabited by Han, Hui and Tibetans. Referring to the political status of the ethnic Tibetans, he notes that they were organized into tribes which were nominally under China, not political Tibet, but in most ways were effectively independent: 'Although the Tibetans living here are under Chinese administration, they are not dependent on the Chinese and are not particularly influenced by Chinese culture'. (Stubel, pp. 6-7)

A third Western account was written by Eric Teichman, a scholarly British consular agent who was stationed in Western China (and present in Kham) in the 1911-18 era. Steeped in the history of this area, his account echoes the observations of the above-cited authors, albeit for Kham not Amdo:

The boundary between China and Tibet was demarcated by a pillar, said to have been erected in the year 1727... on the Bum La (in Chinese Ning-ching Shan), a small pass two and a half days south-west of Batang. The country to the west of this point was handed over to the rule of the Dalai Lama under the suzerainty of the Manchu Emperor, while the Tibetan Chiefs of the States and tribes to the east of it were given seals as semi-independent feudatories of China. This arrangement lasted for nearly two centuries, until the Chinese forward movement initiated in 1905 as a result of the British advance on Lhasa in the preceding year. (Teichman, p. 2)

At the beginning of the present century, before the British expedition to Lhasa in 1904 and the subsequent Chinese forward movement in Kam, that portion of High Asia inhabited by Tibetan-speaking peoples, and labeled *Tibet* on European maps, consisted of three separate entities, firstly, the Lama Kingdom of Tibet with its provinces and dependencies, secondly, the semi-independent Native States of Kham under Chinese protection, and thirdly, the Kokonor [Amdo] Territory under the control of the Chinese Amban residing at Sining and Kansu.

The Kingdom of Tibet, ruled by the Dalai Lama from Lhasa ... extended north to the Dang La range separating it from the Kokonor and east to the Bum La, the frontier pass near Batang. (*Ibid.*, pp. 7-8)

A firsthand account by Aten, a Tibetan exile from Nyarong, an Eastern Khamba area, supports this analysis. In his discussion of the rise of the famous Nyarong chieftain Gombo Namgye in 1860, Aten wrote as follows:

Then, in the early nineteenth century, there rose a man in Nyarong who, through sheer ability and ruthlessness, united the whole of Eastern Tibet, drove the Chinese back to the border of the ancient emperors, and made the Manchu Emperor of China quiver in his satin shoes ... He failed only to conquer the province of Amdo, the extreme northern extent of Tibet. Otherwise he had taken back and united every inch of land within the frontiers established by the ancient Tibetan emperors ... The Manchu Emperor of China became enraged. This barbarian upstart, this petty chief of some insignificant Tibetan tribes, had in a few strokes deprived the Celestial Empire of the fruits of centuries of painful conquests and brainracking intrigues. (Norbu, pp. 25-6)

Like Teichman's account, Aten, therefore, indicates that at the time Gombo Namgye rose to power in 1860, Nyarong and the surrounding Khamba areas were under China (at least nominally), not the Lhasa-based Tibetan Government.

Gombo Namgye's conquest of the neighbouring ethnic-Tibetan (Khamba) states, such as Derge and the Hor States, led them to appeal to both the Chinese and Tibetan Governments for help against the Nyarong invaders. China was then deeply involved with the Taiping rebellion and the machinations of imperialist nations and, as Teichman puts it, was 'unable to take any action towards restoring order in the Tibetan States under their nominal protection' (Teichman, p. 5).

The Tibetan Government, however, sent an army to pacify Gombo Namgye in 1863 and, two years later in 1865, defeated him by trickery, burning his castle with him and his family inside. Tibet then took over the formal administration of Nyarong, and appointed a high commissioner (*nya-ron sbyi-khyab*) to govern the area. According to Teichman, Derge and the Hor States, which lie north of Nyarong, were 'freed from the Nyarong invaders and restored to independence under the rule of their own native Rajahs' (*Ibid.*).

Teichman further elaborated:

The Tibetan claim to Nyarong, and to a lesser extent to De-ge and the Hor States, dated from this time (1865). Nyarong appears to have been annexed by the Dalai Lama with the approval of the Manchu Throne. (*Ibid.*)

The trouble resurfaced in 1894 when the Tibetans of Nyarong invaded Chala (Tachienlu). Teichman describes this interesting incident as follows:

The Viceroy of Szechuan [Sichuan], Lu Ch'uan-lin, despatched a Chinese force which occupied Nyarong and suppressed the disorders. Viceroy Lu thereupon proposed, in a Memorial to the Throne, to take over the administration of Nyarong with Chinese officials. In this he was, however, opposed by the Manchu Amban at Lhasa and the Manchu Commander-in-Chief at Chengtu, while the Dalai Lama also sent representatives to Peking *via* India and the sea route protesting against any Chinese annexation of Tibetan territory. As a result of these representations Viceroy Lu's Memorial proposing the changes was rejected by the Throne, and the Tibetan Governor was reinstated in Nyarong. (*Ibid.*, p.6)³

Aten, the Tibetan exile from Nyarong, discusses the fall of Gombo Namgye in a manner parallel to Teichman, concluding: 'However, Gombo Namgye's efforts were not entirely in vain, for Eastern Tibet was *reunited* with the rest of Tibet. For about 40 years we were free.' (Norbu, p. 27; emphasis added) In other words, just before this incident he again indicates that this part of Kham was not included in the Tibetan polity.

Aten then continues his account of the history of Nyarong:

Nevertheless, the Tibetan Government could not retain Gonpo Namgyal's conquests... In 1903... the Chinese Army under General Chao Er feng [Zhao Erfeng] invaded Litang and Batang from the south... Little by little, the frontiers began to fall and gradually the whole of Eastern Tibet was occupied by the Chinese. (*Ibid.*, p. 28)

Zhao actually reset the border at Giamda (Gyamda) in Kongbo (Kongpo), less than 350 kilometres east of Lhasa, and started to subvert the 'native chief' system by deposing them and bringing their states under more direct Chinese rule via Chinese magistrates (*Tusi*) and so forth. After forty years under the Tibetan Government, these areas once again fell under the control of China, this time under more direct, day-to-day administration.

For this part of Kham, however, the frontier remained unstable, and border skirmishes between Tibetan and Chinese troops led to an outbreak of warfare in 1917-19 between Tibet and China. In this confrontation the Tibetan army soundly defeated the Chinese forces and, with the 1918 Treaty of Rongbatsa (brokered in large part by Eric Teichman), Tibet regained Chamdo, Traya (Drayab) and Markham – states located to the west of the Yangtse River – as well as Derge to the east of that river. However, Nyarong and many other Khamba areas east of the Yangtse River, such as Litang, Kanze (*Ganzi, dkar-mdzes*), Batang and Tachienlu, remained part of China and outside the territory of the Tibetan Government. This demarcation remained in place until 1931 when new fighting between troops of the Tibetan and Chinese Governments erupted in the Kanze area. Aten commented as follows:

But in the Spring of 1931... the monastery of Dhargay in Tri Hor [part of the Hor States], north of Nyarong, revolted against its Chinese overlords... The Chinese rushed in soldiers to quell the rebellion, and fighting broke out in that area. The monastery was besieged, and in desperation the monks appealed to the Tibetan Government in Lhasa for help. (*Ibid.*, p. 22)

A Tibetan army was sent and at first the Chinese were badly defeated, with the Tibetan soldiers not only taking control of Nyarong, but also most of Eastern Kham. This victory was short-lived, however, and a Chinese counter-attack in 1932 drove the Tibetan army back to the Yangtse River. Aten describes this poignantly:

After about a year, the Tibetan Army suffered drastic setbacks in its advance east. The retreating Chinese, now strengthened with reinforcements, pushed back our small army and finally poured into Eastern Tibet. It was a bitter day for all of us when our ancient Lion Standard was hauled down, and the red and yellow flags of the Chinese Nationalists flown from the Castle of the Female Dragon [in Nyarong]. (*Ibid.*, p. 47)

This defeat of the Tibetan army set the *de facto* border in Kham at the Upper Yangtse River (the Drichu). From 1932, none of the ethnic Tibetan (Khamba) areas east of the Yangtse River was under the control of the Tibetan Government. Thus, while the Sino-Tibetan border in Kham fluctuated during the period 1865-1932, after 1932 it remained constant. And Amdo remained outside Tibetan Government control from the early 18th century until 1949. Consequently, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) took control of Sichuan/Sikang, Qinghai and Gansu in 1949, these Tibetan areas were not part of Tibet. Aten's account, for example, explicitly states this: 'When the Communist army invaded Eastern Tibet, most of it was already under the rather desultory occupation of the Nationalist Chinese.' (*Ibid.*, p. 79) Thus, the recent practice of writing about the Tibetan areas of Amdo and Eastern Kham as if they were part and parcel of Tibet until 1949, when the Communists conquered and separated them, is clearly historically incorrect.

Consequently, the increasingly common claim that Tibet was invaded by the Chinese Communist in 1949 is also incorrect. This, to be sure, is the time when Amdo and Eastern Kham were conquered by the

PLA; but as elaborated above, Amdo and Eastern Kham were not part of the Tibetan state at that time.

This, moreover, is not simply the view of a Western historian in the 1990s. It was also the view of the Tibetan Government in 1949, which did not consider the Chinese Communist conquest of China (including Amdo and much of Kham) as an invasion of its territory. As a result, in 1949 it neither sent its troops to defend these areas nor issued any protests, appeals or charges that its territory had been invaded. On the other hand, when the PLA crossed the Upper Yangtse River in October 1950, the armies under the command of Ngabö (Ngapo), the Tibetan Governor-General, at once engaged the Chinese forces in battle. On November 7, 1950, the Lhasa Government issued an emotional plea for help to the United Nations protesting against the invasion of its territory:

While these negotiations were proceeding in Delhi [that is, negotiations between representatives of the Tibetan Government and the Chinese Communists], Chinese troops, without warning or provocation, crossed the Dre Chu River [the Upper Yangtse River], *which has for long been the boundary into Tibetan territory*, at a number of places on 7th October, 1950. In quick succession places of strategic importance...fell to the Chinese...The armed invasion of Tibet for the incorporation of Tibet within the fold of Chinese communism through sheer physical force is a clear case of aggression [emphasis added].⁴

The Tibetan Government's understanding and use of the term 'Tibet' in 1949-50, therefore, was identical with that of Richardson in that it did not include the ethnic areas not under its control.⁵ The Tibetan Government, to be sure, did not relinquish its claims to these areas, but there was no question of where the authority of its state ended.