

POLICY BRIEF

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Territorial Annexation of Tibet: Tenure of the 13th Dalai Lama (1876-1933) recorded by Charles Bell (Former British Political Representative in Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim)

Dr. Monika Chansoria

History often tends to repeat itself, or as Spanish-American philosopher, Jorge Agustín Santayana wrote in 1905-06 in *The Life of Reason*, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”. While setting out to write on, or about Tibet, it is inevitable to conclude that there never was, or will be, a long walk to freedom either for Tibet, or for the holy chair of the successive Dalai Lamas – the god and king-in-one incarnation of Chen-re-zi, the Lord of Mercy – the patron deity of Tibet. The Dalai Lama not only governs his subjects in this life, but can influence their rebirth in the next, or as Tibetans believe is the “Ruler in this life, the Uplifter in the hereafter.”¹ The journeys of the Dalai Lamas in and out of Tibet recount being perennially those, which forced them out of their homeland in the most pressing, dark, and arduous circumstances. These have been recorded most persuasively by Sir Charles Bell, British civil servant, and former British Political Representative in Tibet, Bhutan, and Sikkim, whose accounts dedicated to the memory of the 13th Dalai Lama stand testament to their long and affectionate friendship. Bell’s work *Portrait of The Dalai Lama* published in 1946 is amongst the finest accounts on Tibet’s chequered history. It’s important to understand Tibet’s geography and the course of events that shaped its historical and political destiny in order to realize the relations that Tibet shared with the powers that encircled it.² The Chinese overlordship, which commenced early in the 18th century and ended in 1912, was often little more than nominal.³ China’s

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1 Sir Charles Bell, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*, (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1946), p. 137.

2 Charles Bell, “Tibet’s Position in Asia Today,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 1, October 1931, pp. 134-35.

3 Ibid.

endeavor to control the foreign policy of Tibet sprang mainly from two reasons: First, the Chinese desired the country as a barrier on the west; and second, from 1642, when the supreme authority of the Dalai Lama was established—China sought his spiritual backing to restrain the turbulent Mongols from invading the northern Chinese provinces.⁴

The Violent History of Dalai Lamas’ Return to Tibet

The archives of Tibet’s tempestuous political history, upheaval, and brutal territorial conquer by Mainland China marks six decades this year. The incumbent 14th Dalai Lama’s exile from Tibet and setting up of the Tibetan government-in-exile in India is in its 60th year in 2019. Travelling a fortnight through perhaps the most difficult terrain in the world, the 14th Dalai Lama arrived in India on a yak by crossing the border at Khenzimane (the peripheral Indian border area lying north of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh) on March 31, 1959, after leaving Lhasa in perhaps the darkest last night that he spent in his homeland. Upon arrival in India, the first Indian post he crossed was at Chuthangmu, north of Tawang (then part of Kameng Frontier Division). Once past the Indo-Tibetan border, the Assam Rifles accorded him a guard of honor in Tawang and escorted His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. Following a brief stay at Bomdila (the headquarters of the West Kameng district in Arunachal Pradesh) the Dalai Lama travelled to the hills of northern India and set up the Tibetan Government-in-exile in a town named Dharamsala on April 29, 1959.⁵

Recently, while addressing a public event in Dharamsala in the spring of 2018, the Prime Minister of the Tibetan government-in-exile,

Lobsang Sangay recalled the “thousands and thousands of Tibetans killed and died for the cause of Tibet...and many of them burned themselves alive”. Sangay appealed that Tibetans should redouble their efforts to “reunite the Dalai Lama” with his countrymen, and make the return to his native land and to his original residence at the Potala Palace in Lhasa, a reality. While Sangay made this fervent pitch, a few days later the 14th Dalai Lama addressed a few public events in New Delhi stating, “We will remain with the People’s Republic of China, but meantime, we have the right to our own culture, our own language, and our tradition.” He expressed that Tibet might remain part of China if its geographical, cultural and linguistic autonomy is guaranteed. In the contemporary context, the 14th Dalai Lama’s approach towards Tibet’s future could be labeled to being cautiously realistic for he foresees the near impossible road and return to his homeland. The reality is that in a time span of around 100 years, Tibet’s destiny has transitioned from its call for independence, to what today has become “asking for autonomy” while remaining part of the People’s Republic of China.

The Tibet that was in 1904

In 1904, when the British (Younghusband) expedition to Tibet invaded Lhasa, it opened the door to British influence in central Tibet, forcing the present Dalai Lama’s predecessor, the 13th Dalai Lama (1876-1933) to flee first to Mongolia, and thereafter to China. A question that continues to be debated is whether Britain considered the Peking Convention of 1906 made when Tibet was under Chinese suzerainty, to be precluding it from helping Tibet in the later years, though the latter had been, for 19 years, an independent nation.⁶

4 Ibid., p. 135; Mongolia had obtained its Buddhism from Tibet and remained spiritually subordinate to the Dalai Lama. The head of its Church, the Grand Lama of Urga, was in his later reincarnations, a Tibetan, the last having been born in the very shadow of the Dalai Lama’s palace.

5 Monika Chansoria, “The Tibet that was in 1912,” *The Sunday Guardian*, May 13, 2018.

6 Bell, “Tibet’s Position in Asia Today” n. 2, p. 143.

By 1909, whilst the 13th Dalai Lama was still on his way to Lhasa, a new Chinese military administrator, named Chao Erh-feng was actively pushing troops towards Lhasa launching attacks in three Tibetan provinces. Before eventually arriving back in Lhasa via Peking reportedly in December 1909, the 13th Dalai Lama learnt that Chao, infamous for leading brutal military campaigns throughout eastern Tibet, had moved along with his forces into central Tibet, with nearly 2,000 soldiers reaching Lhasa by February 1910. Upon drawing closer to Lhasa the Dalai Lama found that the Government of China had broken their pledges to him of not interfering with his position in Tibet. His Holiness, the 13th, realized that his Chinese hosts had breached their peaceful arrangement with him in Peking by giving him no hint of the attack.⁷ Upon his return to Lhasa from Peking in 1909, the Chinese did not accord the Dalai Lama the same honor that his antecedents had received by the previous Mongol emperors. Sensing that its position inside Tibet was getting stronger, China planned to conquer and control Tibet. To deflect attention, Peking conveyed to the Tibetans that the approaching Chinese troops intended to protect the Tibetans against the British. On the contrary, the deceitful objective was that China wanted to unite Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan as the southern barrier of Tibet, with the British being the northern barrier of India.⁸

A Tibetan biography states: “Some of the influential Chinese Ministers in whose hearts the devils dwelt, the Governor-General of Szechuan, and Chao Erh-feng, and the Amban in Tibet, all these having agreed upon an intrigue had played an evil trick like an underground thread.”⁹ The real jolt struck when Chinese troops arrived within striking distance of Lhasa. As the 13th Dalai Lama returned to Tibet from China, Chao-appointed “Resident of Tibet” was

known to be committing excesses through his troops, including destroying monasteries and sacred images, looting monastic properties and tearing up sacred books and converting leaves from holy Tibetan scriptures to make soles for the soldiers’ boots. The purported plan to seize the Dalai Lama and his Ministers got trickled, according to Bell’s notes which chronicle many personal conversations between him and the 13th Dalai Lama. In some places, the Dalai Lama narrates numerous endeavors of the Chinese soldiers to capture him. To that extent, Bell wrote that had the advance guard of Chao’s troops managed to capture the Dalai Lama, they would have imprisoned and put the latter to death. In wake of the growing Chinese aggression and atrocities, which he later described as a breach of the peaceful arrangement between him and the Chinese Republic in Peking, the 13th Dalai Lama was compelled to flee Tibet and move to Darjeeling in India through a track of the mountains between Lhasa and the Himalayas. During this escape, he traveled 30 miles east of Gyang-tse (the third-largest town in Tibet) covering a distance of 270 miles in nine days. In his own written and recorded account, the Dalai Lama denoted that he chose to come to India to utilize the mediation of the British government for representing Tibetan matters to China. In another account, the Dalai Lama expressed that his testing ride to India had enabled him not just to retain his own freedom, but the hope to establish the freedom of his country when the time was ripe.

The Political Struggle and Upheaval, 1909-11

Even though China promised Britain in 1910 that it would not attempt to turn Tibet into a Chinese province, it had for many years in the past unremittingly tried doing so. One of the primary methods was that of making maps of

7 ‘Chinese Troops Invade Tibet’ Chapter X, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*, n. 1, p. 81.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 79.

9 *Ibid.*

Tibet, and showing large areas on these maps as provinces of China, giving these provinces new names that were unknown to the Tibetans themselves.¹⁰ The northeastern districts of Tibet reaching to Koko Nor were named Chinghai¹¹ and the people of Kham in Eastern Tibet had to remember that their territory was renamed the Hsi-k'ang Province of China. Bell notes Tibetan officials telling him that the Government of China intended to split up Tibet on paper even further. The Chinese authorities issued these maps to foreigners, and thus *induced the idea* that Tibet is only a half, or even a quarter, of its real size, the remainder, including the more fertile parts being provinces of China.¹² The Tibetans lacked the capability of making maps and had practically no contact with foreign people. This made it nearly impossible for the world to know of the real state of affairs inside Tibet. Throughout Inner Mongolia too, China adopted the same map-making means but with a difference. Since it exercised far more control over Inner Mongolia, it was able to provide a semblance of reality to the provinces, albeit against the wish of the greater majority of the Mongols themselves.¹³

Throughout 1910, and during a greater part of 1911, the troubles of the Dalai Lama and his government only increased rather than diminishing.¹⁴ The British observed neutrality, but accorded protection, hospitality, and personal kindness to the god-king and his ministers in their hour of trouble. This action captured the affections of the Tibetan people, especially when it became clear that the British

had no desire to annex Tibetan territory. Meanwhile, the Chinese troops showed up badly in comparison with the disciplined soldiers of Britain and India.¹⁵ Since 1904 there had been no vestige of an attack from India, whereas China has been attacking Tibet, off and on, the whole time. China kept many thousand soldiers along its frontier with Tibet, whereas on the long frontier between Tibet and India, not even one thousand British and Indian soldiers were recorded. When the Dalai Lama fled to India in 1910 from the Chinese invasion, the Tibetans would have welcomed a British Protectorate.¹⁶ In comparison, the Chinese were in very bad odor throughout most of Tibet, especially among the members of the government. The acts of sacrilege committed by their invading troops, their ambitious designs for controlling the administration, the fear that their soldiery, known to be infected with Bolshevist doctrines and their military weakness as compared with Britain, Russia or Japan—all these considerations combined to arraign it as an enemy.¹⁷

Tibet during the Chinese (Xinhai) Revolution

In the first half of 1911, the Dalai Lama was still struggling against the seeming impossibility of escaping from Chinese domination. However, during the later half of that year fate suddenly intervened in his favor, with revolution breaking out in China. The Manchu Emperor of China was deposed and every vestige of the Manchu rule was swept away. From the earliest times, the political relations existing between Tibet

10 Charles Bell, "Tibet and its Neighbors," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 10, no. 4, December 1937, p. 437.

11 Qinghai (青海) formerly Tsinghai, Ch'inghai, or Kokonur, today is one of the largest province-level administrative divisions in northwest China, ranked fourth-largest in area, with the third-smallest population; for related reference also see 中国地名录 – Record of Chinese Geographical Names (2nd edition) China Maps Press 1995, Beijing, p. 309.

12 Bell, "Tibet and its Neighbors," n. 10, pp.437-38.

13 Ibid.

14 'Political Struggles' Chapter XVI, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*, n. 1, p. 116.

15 Bell, "Tibet's Position in Asia Today," n. 2.

16 Bell, "Tibet and its Neighbors," n. 10, p. 436.

17 Bell, "Tibet's Position in Asia Today," n. 2, pp. 139-40.

and China were based, primarily, on the special personal equation that the Dalai Lamas shared with the Mongol emperors. With the collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1912 following the Chinese rebellion, this relationship ceased to exist.¹⁸ In several cities the Chinese massacred the Manchu garrisons. In November 1911, most of the Chinese garrisons in Tibet mutinied.¹⁹ Subsequently, the Chinese Revolution (*Xinhai* 辛亥革命) of 1911-12 overthrew China's last imperial Qing (Manchu) dynasty and established the Republic of China with a provisional Constitution promulgated by the Nanjing Parliament, with the government transferred to Peking. The Chinese Revolution directly impacted Chinese authority in Tibet. In June 1912, the 13th Dalai Lama, with his Ministers, returned from India to Tibet. Setting off on his backward voyage from Kalimpong, the "returning sovereign" was determined to govern it. The five years of exile since 1904, followed immediately by another period of two years since 1910, congealed the 13th Dalai Lama's resolve to counter the Chinese power and rule which has been recorded in Tibetan biographies, and subsequently also in the Dalai Lama's own political testament, wherein he referred to his years in exile attributing them to the dreadful actions of the Chinese.

An agreement between the Chinese and Tibetan representatives in presence of Gurkha witnesses in August 1912 discussed a "three-point" proposal stating:

- All arms and equipment including field guns and Maxim guns in possession of the Chinese at Dabshi and Tseling in Lhasa shall be sealed;

- Bullets and gunpowder shall be collected and deposited in the Doring house; and
- Chinese officials and soldiers shall leave Tibet within 15 days.

A few months into his return to Tibet, Yuan Shih-kai, then President of the Republic of China, sent a telegraphed message to the Dalai Lama, apologizing for the excesses of the Chinese troops. The "restored" 13th Dalai Lama took the opportunity and responded by stating that he was not soliciting the Chinese government of the day for any rank or position, for he proposed to exercise, both, temporal and ecclesiastical rule in Tibet – as has been recorded in *Portrait of The Dalai Lama*. This, in other words, could be interpreted as the 13th Dalai Lama's pronouncement of Tibetan independence.

The strains started becoming visible when in 1913-14, Tibet claimed that it was an independent state at the onset of the Simla Conference [October 1913 – July 1914] with China counter-claiming that Tibet was one of its provinces. In the second meeting of the Conference on November 18, 1913, Arthur Henry McMahon (assisted by Charles Bell) said, according to the recorded minutes, that he did not see how the political status of Tibet could be discussed until the limits of the country were defined.²⁰ McMahon tabled a statement on the limits of Tibetan territory and prepared a partition of Tibet: China to administer Inner Tibet, leaving Outer Tibet completely autonomous, albeit under Chinese suzerainty. On March 11, 1914, McMahon presented to the Conference a draft convention, the text of which he had received from London

18 Chansoria, n. 5; on the fall of the Qing dynasty and the 1912 Chinese Revolution see, Sanderson Beck, "Qing Dynasty Fall 1875-1912," *East Asia 1800-1949, Ethics of Civilization*, Vol. 1; for related reading, see Makoto Tachibana, "The 1911 Revolution and 'Mongolia': Independence, Constitutional Monarchy, or Republic," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, vol.3, no. 1, 2014, pp. 69-90.

19 'The Tide Turns' Chapter XVII, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama*, n. 1, p. 124.

20 A.G. Noorani, "Strategic Differences," *Frontline*, vol. 25, no. 26, Dec 2008 – Jan 2009, Chennai, India.

– clearly mentioning the borders between China and Tibet be drawn approximately along the upper waters of the Yangtze; and the boundary between Outer and Inner Tibet. Lonchen Shatra, who represented Tibet at the Simla Conference, had Lhasa’s approval to the border agreement he had reached with Charles Bell.²¹ The formal shape in the form of an exchange of diplomatic notes between McMahon and Lonchen was given on March 24-25, 1914, not at Simla, but in Delhi, which was the venue of the Conference between January to March 1914.²²

On April 27, 1914, moving back to Simla, the representatives of all the three parties initialed the convention that McMahon had presented along with the map. Ivan Chen, the Chinese plenipotentiary, wrote his name in full, though, two days later, the Chinese government repudiated his action. On July 3, 1914, having waited in vain for China’s adherence, India and Tibet signed a Declaration with McMahon and Lonchen affixing their seals.²³ Notably, every single Chinese document objecting to that convention confined and centered the objections only to the border between Inner and Outer Tibet and on China’s relations with Tibet. Not once was the Indo-Tibetan boundary [the McMahon Line] mentioned. This was true of Chinese objections before the convention was concluded on April 27, 1914, as well as all those made thereafter.²⁴ In fact, Dorothy Woodman wrote in the 1969 book, *Himalayan Frontiers: A Political Review of British, Chinese, Indian and Russian Rivalries*, “As far as available records show, Chen did not, at any time complain of the bilateral agreement between India and Tibet

defining 850 miles of their border.”²⁵ What was agreed to was maintaining three trade agencies in Tibet—at Gyantse, which lay between the Himalayas and Lhasa; at Yatung, north of the Himalayas; and also at Gartok in western Tibet.

Han-exclusive vision of Chinese history, texts

The discourse of ethnicity in China’s history textbooks for senior high schools, published particularly between 1951 and 1956, exhibited a Han-exclusivist vision and version of Chinese history. In the immediate period following recognition of Communist China in 1949, the representation of non-Han people in Chinese history textbooks belonging to pre-modern Chinese history is noticeable.²⁶ During the early 1950s, these people were treated as non-Chinese, and referred to as “foreigners”. The textbooks published by the Peoples Education Press (*Renmin Jiaoyu chubanshe*) in Beijing, held a profound influence on the teaching guidelines and references for the history teachers, writings of scholars, academics and editors.²⁷ More importantly, these textbooks were symbolic of China’s mainstream history writing and became the most extensively read and quoted historical texts. The history textbook of 1951 recorded Chinese history exclusively as that of the Han people, referring to non-Han people as foreigners (*yizu or waizu*). These texts managed to create a clear dichotomy between the Han population (known earlier as *Hua*) and other ethnic groups that were depicted in an exceptionally damaging and negative light.²⁸

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Dorothy Woodman, *Himalayan Frontiers: A Political Review of British, Chinese, Indian and Russian Rivalries*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), p. 181.

26 Monika Chansoria, “Han-exclusive vision of Chinese history, texts,” *The Sunday Guardian*, October 13, 2018.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

In a startling revelation, the Non-Han populations were called backward nomads leading a morally inferior and retrograde life. Han people (*Hanren*) or Chinese people (*Zhongguoren*) were fungible terms that were used interchangeably more than often. This primarily implied that China (*Zhongguo*), its history, and culture, were exclusive for the Han—creating an obvious dissimilarity between “us and them”.²⁹ The 1951 textbook further suggests that China became a unified nation-state of the Han people by the time of the Qing dynasty, which was credited with the establishment of a “mono-ethnic” nation-state (*minzu guojia*). The subsequent history textbook of 1956, which was the first to be completely published under the Communist regime, continued to label non-Han people as non-Chinese. What also remained constant was that the most prominent ethnic groups, namely, the Tibetans and the Uighurs among others, were continued to be labeled and treated as “outsiders” in 1956, as such were in 1951.³⁰ All this only re-established the common thread that historiographical writing institutes. From the time when Han-exclusive narratives dominated, to now, when the non-Han Uighurs and Tibetans are being subjected to all-pervasive suppression, the despair and relegation of China’s minorities in their native captured homelands continues.

After returning to England and penning his notes in Crowthorne in May 1937, Charles Bell summed up three main challenges that confronted the *Yellow and the Grey in the Land of Snow* – as Tibetans termed their priests, their laity, and their country: to spot and find the new Dalai Lama; to maintain the independence of their fatherland; and, to bring back the Panchen Lama without coming under Chinese domination.³¹ Describing the life and times

of Tibet, Basil Gould, a British trade agent in Gyantse from 1912-13 narrates in his notes published in November 1949 that the problem of Tibet’s future was whether China would continue to seek to dominate and destroy Tibetan national identity, religion, and its distinct culture.³² Suffice to conclude that Gould’s notes on Tibet’s history have become its present-day destiny, in a fateful paradox.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Bell, “Tibet and its Neighbors,” n. 10, p. 440.

32 Basil Gould, “Tibet and Her Neighbours,” *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944), vol. 26, no. 1, January 1950, pp. 71-76.