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The Impact of Chinese Reign on the Development of Tibet (1950-Today)

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Abstract:

When thinking about Tibet, people often envision Mount Everest and "the paradise" secluded from the world. What most people do not know is the struggle of Tibetans under the Chinese Communist regime and the thousands of deaths it has caused. In history, Tibet has been both an independent nation and part of powerful Chinese and Mongolian dynasties. In 1950, Chinese troops took over and started a period of drastic change in Tibet. As a result, Tibet's economy developed rapidly, but it was at the cost of losing its rich culture and traditions. To maintain its rule over Tibet, China should not just focus on economic development, but, more importantly, preserve Tibet's culture and religion by adhering to the agreements made earlier.

Keywords: *Tibet, religious freedom, autonomy, cultural preservation, economic benefits*

1. Background History

Ever since the 1900s, there has been tension between Tibet and China over the sovereignty of Tibet and rights of Tibetans which still exists today. In 1950, after the Communist government united China, the People's Liberation Army annexed Tibet in the name of liberating it from imperial powers. Tibetans, infuriated by the invasion, resisted and appealed to the United Nations for support. Finally, in 1951, the Chinese authority was willing to negotiate with the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, and made a compromise, known as the Seventeen Point Agreement.¹ This treaty was fair for both sides as it claimed China's sovereignty over Tibet, but also addressed the interests of Tibetans. For example, as Point 7 states, "The religious beliefs, customs, and habits of the Tibetan People shall be respected, and lama monasteries shall be protected."² After the treaty was signed, peace appeared initially, but did not last long. The Chinese government violated the terms of the agreement by closing monasteries and banning religious practices of the Tibetan people. As a result, The Dalai Lama felt threatened, so he sought asylum in India.³ These actions escalated the conflict as Tibetans were angered by the exile of their spiritual leader and started to rebel against Chinese rule. After many decades, the issue is still controversial, and a solution has not been reached yet, because the controversy extends to economics, religion, politics, and culture.

2. Economic Development

Under Chinese reign over the past century, Tibet has made a drastic transformation from a place segregated from the world to a modern society. Westerners typically romanticize Tibet as a paradise free from the problems of the modern world. However, before Chinese rule, sexual abuse happened constantly in monasteries, and 98% of the people were enslaved in serfdom. Even the Dalai Lama once said, "Tibet, materially, is very, very backward. Spiritually, it is quite rich. But spirituality can't fill our stomachs."⁴ This statement implies that the Dalai Lama acknowledges the economic benefits of Chinese rule, but advocates for changes in other areas. It is clear that the living standards of Tibetans improved as more hospitals were opened, schools were established in every major village, and the life expectancy rate doubled.⁵ Therefore, separation from China is not a solution as Tibet needs China to improve its economy and living situation. However, while making these advancements, the Communist regime destroyed Tibet's culture and religion which many Tibetans value more.

¹Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 2:19.

² Ibid., 102.

³Holiness of Dalai Lama, *My Land and My People* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1962), 139.

⁴Sorrel Neuss, "What we don't hear about Tibet," *The Guardian*, last modified 2 11, 2009, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/feb/10/tibet-china-feudalism>.

⁵ Ibid.



Figure 1: This Picture Shows a School That the Communist Regime Has Opened in Tibet- a Sign That the Educational System There Is Improving

3. Religious Oppression

Chinese authority has restricted Tibetans from practicing their religion which violates many international laws regarding human rights and religious freedom. Tibetan Buddhism, also known as the Vajrayana branch of Buddhism, is a mixture of Buddhism and Tibet's indigenous religions. It has been deeply engraved in the lives of Tibetans for thousands of years. However, the Chinese government views it as Tibetan nationalism and a way for Tibetans to seek independence. Mao once said to the Dalai Lama, "religion is very harmful to the development of a nation. First of all, it acts as a hindrance to material progress and secondly, it weakens the race. ... Religion is poison."⁶ These statements only show Mao's ignorance of the importance of religion in the lives of Tibetans and does not justify the cruel actions done towards the religion by any means. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone should have the freedom to practice, change, and renounce one's religion which was not guaranteed for Tibetans under Chinese rule.⁷ The Chinese government says that its ultimate purpose of ruling Tibet is for the good of Tibetans as they become Chinese citizens.⁸ However, religion is central to the lives of many Tibetans; without it, they live a life with no purpose and would feel empty even if they have a lot of material possessions. Therefore, apart from improving Tibet's economy, the Chinese authority should preserve Tibetans' religious beliefs and allow for diversity within the country.

Tibetan Buddhism has been slowly fading away ever since the Communist regime took over the region as it made efforts to undermine and eventually eliminate the religion by destroying sacred places and restricting religious education towards Tibetans. During the Cultural Revolution, over 6000 monasteries were destroyed, and the persecution and imprisonment of clergy has also reduced Tibet's monastic population by about 93%.⁹ Furthermore, the Chinese government imposed many laws on monastic education, which has always been crucial to the younger generation as they grow up. Today, monastic education can only begin at the age of 18, when it should be at a younger age.¹⁰ By doing so, the Chinese authority is subtly trying to bring the religion to extinction. What people learn when they are young has a huge impact on their lives and shapes their thinking. Due to restrictions on monastic education, young Tibetans are not learning about the traditions of their ancestors and instead are being taught a biased view of their religion. These limitations do not help the Chinese government in controlling Tibetans but only creates hatred. If Tibetans were given more freedom in their lives, they would live happily under Chinese reign and would not seek independence. Apart from religion, Tibetan culture is also on the verge of extinction.

⁶Peter Dzedzic, "Religion Under Fire: A Report and Policy Paper on Religious Freedom in Tibet," *The Tibet Journal* 28, nos. 3-4 (2013): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/tibetjournal.38.3-4.87>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Sudeep Basu, "Interrogating Tibetan Exilic Culture: Issues and Concerns," *Sociological Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (2012): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23620966>.



Figure 2: This Picture Illustrates Some of the Monasteries Which Are Being Shut Down, and the Monks Are Having a Hard Time to Fulfill The Purpose of Their Life

4. Cultural Oppression

The intrusion of Hans into Tibet is harmful to preserving the ethnic identity and culture of Tibetans as they are compelled to assimilate into mainstream culture and also oppressed by Hans in the workplace. The Chinese government has created many opportunities for Hans in Tibet encouraging them to immigrate and take over the position of Tibetans in skilled jobs while spreading mainstream Chinese culture. Han is the main ethnic group of China as it accounts for over 90% of the population.¹¹ Thus, it seems reasonable for Hans to immigrate to Tibet as they would make the area more modern and compatible with mainstream society. However, according to scholar Michael Davis, "Chinese policies to encourage immigration are seen as a Chinese aim to dominate urban commercial sector and assimilate minorities."¹² A study of the communication between Hans and Tibetans in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, shows that there is tension between the two ethnic groups. Since Hans have higher levels of education, they have replaced Tibetans in many professional fields.¹³ These changes frustrate Tibetans as they have to change their way of living and make extra efforts if they do not want to be unemployed. Furthermore, in schools, many Tibetan children are being taught by Han teachers.¹⁴ Consequently, the Tibetans view the Hans as intruders who have come to occupy their land, take away their jobs, and control their lives. Although it was expected that some Hans may move into the region to help with building the economy, the Chinese government should not portray Tibet as a "new territory" where the Hans would dominate and rule over Tibetans. Instead, the government should try to build synergies between the two cultures and promote coexistence of two ethnic groups living under the same roof.

5. Possible Solutions

There is no simple solution to this long-standing issue, such as granting Tibet independence or allowing China to have complete control over Tibet. Efforts should be made by both parties to reach a compromise which would be similar to the Seventeen Points Agreement signed earlier. The Dalai Lama proposes that finding the Middle Way, a concept of living in Buddhism, could be used to peacefully resolve this issue and also bring stability and co-existence between the Tibetans and the Chinese people.¹⁵ China has the resources to improve Tibet's economy and living conditions. However, the current methods of religious and cultural oppression only escalate the tension and stimulates the urge for Tibetans to seek independence. With the right intentions and a new proposal, China could peacefully govern Tibet while both sides are satisfied.

6. Conclusion

The Chinese government can keep its control over Tibet under the circumstances of adhering to the Seventeen Points Agreement and most importantly preserving Tibet's religion and culture. Controversy about Tibet has been a problem that China is avoiding to bring up but is constantly affecting the lives of Tibetans. Most countries today are fully aware of the issue and ready to take action if it gets worse. Therefore, China's approach on this matter is crucial as it could bring peace to the region while it could also spark another world war.

¹¹ Rong Ma, "Han and Tibetan Residential Patterns in Lhasa," *The China Quarterly*, no. 128 (1991): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/654372>.

¹² Michael C. Davis, "Establishing a Workable Autonomy in Tibet," *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2008): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20072845>.

¹³ Ma, "Han and Tibetan," 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵ The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, "His Holiness's Middle Way for Resolving the Issue of Tibet," His Holiness The 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet, accessed March 8, 2019, <https://www.dalailama.com/messages/tibet/middle-way-approach>.

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