

A History of Modern Tibet, Volume 2

The Calm before the Storm: 1951–1955

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley Los Angeles London

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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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First paperback printing 2009

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Goldstein, Melvyn C.

A history of modern Tibet, vol. 2. The calm before the storm, 1951–1955 / Melvyn C. Goldstein.

p. cm.—(Philip E. Lilienthal Asian studies imprint)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-25995-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Tibet (China)—History. I. Title.

DS786.G635 2007

951'.5055—dc22

2006038083

Manufactured in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09
11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on Natures Book, which contains 50% postconsumer waste and meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39-48-1992 (R 1997) (*Permanence of Paper*).

Chapter 22

Conclusions

The return of the Dalai Lama from his year-long trip to inland China marked the high-water mark in Sino-Tibetan relations in the 1950s. The Dalai Lama was deeply influenced by what he saw in China and by the attitudes of Mao and other Communist Party leaders, with whom he developed excellent rapport. Moreover, he became intellectually enamored with communism as an ideology and as a force for social and economic change and for improving the life of the poor Tibetan masses. He returned to Tibet filled with enthusiasm for developing and modernizing Tibet as a part of China. Mao had won over the Dalai Lama, and it seemed Tibet would now take its place as one of the most important national minority regions of the PRC, gradually being transformed into an autonomous region under the Dalai Lama's leadership.

China's success was the result of a carefully thought out and implemented strategy. From the beginning, it was obvious that incorporating Tibet would bring two diametrically opposite social and political systems face-to-face. The feudal, manorial estate-based socioeconomic system that was extant in Tibet was precisely the type of hereditarily oppressive elite system that the Chinese Communist Party was committed to overthrowing and had done so throughout the rest of China. In Tibet, however, Mao opted not to place "liberating the serfs" as an immediate priority. To the contrary, during the period of this history, traditional Tibetan society with its lords and manorial estates continued to function unchanged. Similarly, despite the presence of roughly twenty thousand PLA troops in Lhasa and Central Tibet, the Dalai Lama's government was permitted to maintain important symbols from its de facto independence period—its own army, its own flag, and its own currency—as well as to continue to collect its own taxes, arrest and punish its own criminals, try civil cases, unilaterally decide how to allocate its income, and pro-

mote and demote officials in its bureaucracy. Amazingly, even runaway serfs could still be caught and whipped with impunity. In the history of the PRC, the scale of this was, and still is, unique.

The architect and director of this moderate Chinese policy toward Tibet was Mao Zedong. His policy had minimal and optimal goals. The minimal goal was to liberate Tibet, whether or not Tibet's leaders agreed to become part of China. If need be, China would simply invade and take over Tibet militarily. Mao's optimal goal also took liberation as a given but laid out a much more ambitious, sophisticated, and nuanced strategic vision for Tibet, the prime focus of which was to incorporate it in a manner that created a stable, loyal Tibet that accepted its place as a part of China and willingly implemented socialist reforms. To achieve this transformation, Mao crafted a pragmatic "gradualist" policy and directly oversaw its implementation.

The first step in this strategy was to secure the "peaceful liberation" of Tibet, that is to say, to induce the Dalai Lama to sign an agreement that accepted Chinese sovereignty over Tibet and the arrival of thousands of Chinese troops and officials in Tibet. Mao deftly used a combination of carrot and stick tactics to achieve this, particularly making the carrot component extremely attractive to Tibet's leaders. The Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government would be allowed to remain in power and reforms would not be implemented without their agreement. However, since the Tibetan elite was clearly not interested in reforming Tibet, offering such terms meant that it could take years to transform Tibet. Mao accepted that reality, feeling that the long-term benefits of a peaceful transformation far outweighed the potential problems in quickly ending serfdom and the estate system.

China eventually was able to induce the Dalai Lama to send representatives to negotiate an agreement known as the Seventeen-Point Agreement. It also succeeded in persuading him to return to Lhasa to work under the agreement, despite the urging of many to flee into exile and denounce the agreement (e.g., the United States, his family, and many top officials, such as Namseling, Surkhang, and Shakabpa).

Peaceful liberation, however, was only the first step. The agreement established a legal framework for Tibet's status as part of the PRC and allowed Chinese troops and officials to enter Central Tibet peacefully, but it was not an end in itself. The second phase of Mao's gradualist policy focused on two related issues: (1) winning over the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan elite and, in concert with them, gradually implementing the Seventeen-Point Agreement so that ultimately socialist reforms and a new Tibet autonomous region would be created with their approval and (2) stabilizing the Chinese physical position in Tibet so that neither internal uprising nor external attack could dislodge them.

Mao's focus on the elite, especially the Dalai Lama, derived from his belief that the poor peasant masses in Tibet were not yet ready, nor would they

be in the near future, to understand and accept class struggle. The powerful hold that religion and lamas had over them would be difficult to overcome, so China's best hope to incorporate Tibet in a positive manner was to work with and through the elite. Mao, in essence, was setting out to change nothing less than the elite's moral framework.

However, not everyone in the Chinese Communist Party agreed with Mao. Fan Ming considered an attempt to win over the Dalai Lama's feudal elite a hopeless task and advocated moving fast in tandem with the Panchen Lama to create demand for land reform among the serfs. His plan was to treat the Panchen Lama and his administration as separate and autonomous from the Tibetan government by giving them control over Back Tibet. Once the Panchen Lama controlled this area, the Panchen Lama would take the initiative and end the estate system and serfdom in his area. When the peasants under the Dalai Lama's government saw this going on beside them, they would demand the same for themselves, Fan was convinced, and this would compel the Dalai Lama to follow suit and disband the old system in his area.

Mao, however, rejected this strategy, believing that using the Panchen Lama in this manner would create such deep hatred of the central government on the Dalai Lama's side that Tibet could never be merged in the positive fashion he thought was important for China's long-term national interests. Tibet and China were at a unique juncture in their history, and it was critical to manage this transition carefully so that, in the end, Tibetans would become loyal citizens of socialist China. Gradualism and the Dalai Lama were the keys to accomplish this, so he insisted that cadres in Tibet, including Fan Ming, adhere to his gradualist program.

Setting out to transform the attitudes and perspectives of the Tibetan religious and feudal elite peacefully was a bold and ambitious undertaking, which Mao understood would require a combination of tact, flexibility, and time. Chinese officials in Tibet, therefore, were repeatedly instructed not to rush to change Tibet. The policy, in words and actions, was to move forward slowly and with great caution. The focus was to be first on the Dalai Lama and the more progressive and friendly segment of the elite and then on winning over more and more of the large undecided middle segment of the elite, while isolating and rendering insignificant the hard-line, anti-Chinese segment. The length of time this process would take depended on how successful Chinese tactics were in influencing the Tibetan elite, but Mao was willing to wait five or ten years or perhaps even longer to achieve this goal. His time commitment at this point was open-ended.

The Chinese officials in Lhasa, therefore, set out to develop cooperative and cordial relationships with the elite and to convince them that these officials had come to Tibet to help them modernize and develop Tibet, not to oppress and exploit them, as previous Chinese regimes had done. Projecting themselves as "new Chinese," the Tibet Work Committee made every

effort to demonstrate respect for Tibetan religion, language, and culture in their speeches and behavior, including giving alms to all the monks in and around Lhasa.

However, while the Chinese were willing to proceed slowly in Tibet, they were not willing to do nothing. Their goal was clearly to transform Tibet in a way that would gradually replace the theocratic and feudal Tibetan autocracy with a Tibet autonomous regional government directly under the central government, although as mentioned above, they wanted to wait until the Dalai Lama and most of the Tibetan elite came to believe these changes were necessary. The Seventeen-Point Agreement, did not specify time frames, so when any of the seventeen points should be implemented was unspecified and depended on a subjective assessment of the conditions and attitudes in Tibet.

China's initial strategy in Tibet also had a practical dimension—stabilizing the PLA's physical position there as soon as possible. With no roads from inland China to Lhasa, the PLA initially had to depend entirely on Tibet for food. They were also vulnerable in the realm of military supplies, for should fighting break out, resupplying would require transportation by pack animals over long and difficult trails. Ending this dependency was a priority, and Mao authorized a crash program to build two roads to Lhasa, one from Sichuan Province and one from Qinghai Province. At the same time, he also ordered his troops in Tibet to make producing their own food a priority equal to that of road building. Beijing also shrewdly negotiated an arrangement with India whereby Chinese rice would be sent though Calcutta to Lhasa. But everything took time in Tibet, and it actually was not until December 1954 that these motor roads opened to traffic.

The Tibetan side, however, had no common voice and no clear strategy for dealing with their new status as part of the People's Republic of China. Within months of signing the Seventeen-Point Agreement, thousands of Chinese troops and officials entered Lhasa, and though virtually all of the elite saw the PLA as an army of occupation, not liberation, the Tibetan government had to decide how it would deal with the Chinese troops and cadres and with the Seventeen-Point Agreement, which had set out general guidelines for what Tibet could be as part of China. These guidelines, as mentioned, were vague and, in a few instances, somewhat contradictory, so there was considerable room for interpretation, maneuvering, and clarification. The future of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan government, and Tibet's traditional institutions was likely to depend on how well the Tibetan government managed this.

In contrast to the Chinese, however, the Tibetan side developed no unified strategy. The two highest offices in the Tibetan government, the sitsab and Kashag, did not cooperate and utilized very different strategies and tactics. From the start, the two sitsab were hostile and confrontational toward

the Chinese, trying not to cooperate on anything the Chinese proposed. They were angry at the Chinese occupation of Tibet and incensed by what, in their view, was the communists' hypocritical rhetoric about being "new" Chinese coming to help Tibet, when they had just launched a bloody invasion of Chamdo. And they were also angry at what they felt was Ngabö's negotiation of a badly flawed agreement. They considered Tibet independent and wanted, naively to be sure, at most an arrangement wherein the Chinese would withdraw virtually all their troops and officials and leave Tibet as it had been during the Qing dynasty era, that is, a loose protectorate of China.

The sitsab's attitudes reflected the majority attitude in Tibet, and they became Tibetan heroes for what was seen as standing up to the Chinese. However, their rhetoric and actions were driven by anger and emotion rather than a carefully calculated plan to negotiate with the Chinese to change the agreement or reinterpret responsibilities. Consequently, virtually every time the sitsab met with the Chinese leaders face-to-face, the meetings literally ended in yelling and screaming matches. Ignoring the reality that Tibet had lost the war and had signed an agreement accepting Chinese sovereignty, the sitsab seemed to think that telling the Chinese they were unwelcome in Tibet was a rational strategy for inducing them to change their policy.

The sitsab's understandable anger, but counterproductive behavior, encouraged opposition and led to the emergence, for the first time in Tibetan history, of a nonelite political organization that called itself the People's Association. And in turn, this led to increased unrest on the streets of Lhasa. As a result of this, the situation quickly deteriorated in Lhasa, and by March 1952, the city teetered on the edge of violence.

The Kashag, by contrast, had a different and pragmatic approach. They, too, were angry about what they saw as the Chinese occupation of their country, and they feared what the Communists might do to Tibet's religious and political institutions in the long run, but, having lost the war, they felt the best strategy was to take the Seventeen-Point Agreement at face value and, on the basis of its guidelines, strive to develop cooperative and cordial relations with the Chinese. Their strategy was to try to make the agreement work for Tibet's interests and welfare.

However, internally, the Kashag itself had different points of view. Ngabö, for example, thought that major reforms were inevitable, so it was best if Tibet took the initiative and implemented them itself. To paraphrase his metaphor, if one makes a hat for oneself it will fit just right, but if one does not and later has to wear a hat made for someone else, the fit will be poor. Several other ministers were also inclined toward moving ahead on reforms, but most opposed any unilateral radical changes. The Kashag, therefore, also did not develop a unified strategic position in regard to the Chinese and the agreement, preferring to deal with issues ad hoc as they arose. On the whole, the Kashag ministers realized reforms would have to be done but, despite

Ngabö's views, were hoping to be able to do them as slowly as possible. Nevertheless, they were clearly committed to working cordially with the Chinese and to living within the guidelines of the Seventeen-Point Agreement. Because of this, they felt the satsab were pursuing a dangerous and unproductive course of action and tried to counterbalance the hostility and enmity projected by them. In turn, the satsab did not trust the Kashag (especially Ngabö) and thus chose not to confide in or work together with them. At this time of extreme crisis, therefore, Tibet's two paramount offices, the Kashag and satsab, were uncoordinated and pursued contrary trajectories.

A month or so after the first PLA troops arrived in Lhasa, the Chinese leadership exacerbated the situation by starting to pressure the Tibetan government to implement changes mentioned in the Seventeen-Point Agreement, for example, to open Lhasa's first primary school, to start the new Tibet Area Military Headquarters, to incorporate the Tibetan army under the PLA, and to create a new military-administrative committee. As was seen, these initiatives were poorly received by the Tibetan side, especially by the two satsab, who were adamant about not changing the Tibetan army or starting a military-administrative committee. This also fueled the growth of the anti-Chinese People's Association. The Tibet Work Committee, therefore, had inadvertently done what Mao had admonished them to avoid at all costs, namely, moving too far too quickly without the cooperation of the elite. Mao responded in April 1952 by taking direct control over events in Tibet, ordering all decisions regarding Tibetans to be cleared first with Beijing. Mao and the Central Committee, from then on, directly managed affairs in Tibet.

The third key player at this time was the Dalai Lama. In theory he could have imposed a unified strategy on his officials and government, but in 1951 he was only sixteen years of age and was, by and large, disengaged from political affairs. Neither his own inclinations nor the advice of his entourage led him to take an active role in determining how Tibet should respond to the Chinese. As a result, he basically sat on the sidelines until events almost spun out of control in 1952, when the People's Association opposed the Chinese and the Chinese sand-bagged their positions and placed their troops on high alert in anticipation of an attack. Ultimately, as we saw, the Chinese and the Kashag appealed to the Dalai Lama to intervene, and, after considerable hesitation, he agreed to order the satsab to step down and ban the People's Association. The Chinese, under instructions from Mao, now set aside all discussions about absorbing the Tibetan army and starting a military-administrative committee. They also compromised with the Kashag by allowing the satsab, in essence, to retire with their full ceremonial status rather than be dismissed and also by not punishing any of the leaders of the People's Association. With the satsab out of the picture, the Kashag now resumed its status as the highest office in the government, and the volatile situation quickly dissipated, ushering in a new period of cooperation with the Chinese.

In this new atmosphere, the Chinese organized popular youth and women's groups, new schools, a newspaper, and a series of tours to see inland China or study there or both. In the next two years more than a thousand Tibetans went to China on tours and to attend meetings, and roughly five hundred Tibetans went to the Nationalities Institute in Beijing to study. And within Tibet, over a thousand Tibetans were enrolled in new primary schools. On the Tibetan government's side, a reform organization headed by Ngabö was begun. He was not only the Kashag minister most trusted by the Chinese but also the one most trusted by the Dalai Lama, who frequently discussed political issues with him privately and who himself was in favor of reforms and modernization for Tibet. In 1953-54, therefore, the Tibetan government's Reform Assembly crafted new laws reforming interest rates, old loans, and the administration of counties. However, despite Ngabö's prominence after 1952, he did not have much skill as a political leader and was not able to change the attitudes of either the majority of less progressive officials or the people.

While this was occurring, on the Chinese side, Mao intervened to definitively end the machinations of Fan Ming, deciding in favor of the Southwest Bureau and the Dalai Lama. Fan Ming's defeat, although not known then by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government, meant Tibet potentially had time to work out changes and reforms its officials and people could live with.

In the midst of this new era of cordiality and cooperation, the Dalai Lama was invited to attend the first meeting of the National People's Congress in 1954. Many in Lhasa opposed his going, fearing that the Chinese would not allow him to return promptly, if at all, or would treat him with disrespect and disdain, or, even more ominous, would influence the attitudes and views of the young and impressionable Dalai Lama. However, he and the Kashag felt it was important to meet the leaders of China face-to-face. After much discussion and disagreement, the issue was deadlocked, and, as in the past, the fate of Sino-Tibetan relations came down to a divine lottery, which broke the deadlock and approved the trip.

The Dalai Lama was powerfully affected by what he saw in inland China and by the leaders he met. At one point he even asked to be allowed to join the Communist Party. Mao's improbable strategy of going slowly and winning over the Dalai Lama had turned out to be an amazing success. Tibet was now poised to enter the third phase of Mao's program by creating new administrative institutions in Tibet with the cooperation of the Dalai Lama—in this case moving to create a preparatory committee for the creation of a Tibet autonomous region. Everything seemed poised for Tibet to begin to move forward now socially, economically, and politically as an integral part of the People's Republic of China.

But notwithstanding the enthusiasm of the Dalai Lama and progressive officials such as Ngabö, implementing reforms in Tibet faced serious oppo-

sition. Many in Tibet, especially the monastic leaders and their monk official allies, opposed land reforms and the relinquishment of other symbols of Tibetan "independence" or distinctiveness, such as Tibet's use of its own currency. They read the Seventeen-Point Agreement to mean that unless they agreed to such changes, they did not have to go forward, so they felt justified in simply saying no.

Mao understood such attitudes still existed in Tibet and continued to support his gradualist strategy, even though the opening of motor roads in December 1954 secured the Chinese position in Tibet. As we saw, when the Dalai Lama left Beijing in March 1955, Mao and Zhou Enlai both counseled him not to let his enthusiasm lead him to move forward prematurely on changes his people were not ready to accept. They advised the Dalai Lama to work with patience and skill to coalesce public opinion for the reforms he would propose. Similarly, in December 1955, Mao reiterated the same message to the Tibet Work Committee in Lhasa.

But Tibet was a premodern state in 1951, with no institutions for propagandizing the people or influencing public opinion. The Tibetan government's perspective had been that politics was not the people's business, so the Dalai Lama had no ready indigenous Tibetan mechanisms to utilize to influence public opinion. Initially, as we saw, as soon as he returned to Lhasa in 1955, he expressed his "political" views during a religious teaching he gave, but if he was to change attitudes and mold a new consensus for his position, he would have to go beyond this and develop new methods of influencing public opinion, including perhaps replacing conservative officials with more progressive ones.

However, notwithstanding the optimism the Dalai Lama felt, the news that the Tibetan government in Beijing had agreed to end Tibetan currency, reduce the army, and establish a Tibet autonomous region generated instant anger and opposition in Lhasa similar to what had occurred in 1952. In Lhasa, the second anti-Chinese People's Association reappeared in 1954-55 under new leadership. It opposed the changes that had occurred since 1952 and especially objected to the forthcoming creation of the Preparatory Committee for the Tibet Autonomous Region. By the fall of 1955, it was challenging the Dalai Lama's view of a new Tibet and, by early 1956, was recreating the disturbances of the People's Association of 1952.

There were also complicating external forces the Dalai Lama would have to address. While the Dalai Lama was in China, a secret anti-Chinese resistance group emerged in India independent of the Tibetan government. Headed by his own older brother Gyalo Thondup and two other government officials, Shakabpa and Lobsang Gyentsen, Jenkhentsisum, as it was known, sought support from India and the United States and, in the second half of 1955, came to be linked with the anti-Chinese Namseling clique in Lhasa and the Dalai Lama's lord chamberlain Phala. It would become an impor-

tant force opposed to the Chinese occupation of Tibet and to compromising solutions with China.

Similarly, far from Lhasa, in the heart of China, a major shift to the left was starting as Mao launched the Socialist Transformation Campaign in 1955. Mao, critical of the slowness of collectivization in China, now called for a rapid acceleration of the implementation of full communes. While this did not directly affect Tibet, since Mao continued to support his gradualist program there, it had major repercussions in Sichuan Province, where Li Jingquan implemented socialist reforms in the ethnic Tibetan (Khamba) areas precipitating a bloody uprising in 1956.

Finally, an important force in the 1950s was the U.S. government. It tried persistently in 1951-52 to induce the Dalai Lama to denounce the Seventeen-Point Agreement and flee into exile, in which case he would have been a valuable anti-communist voice in the Cold War in Asia. But as we have seen, the U.S. offer of support was too little to offset Mao's "carrot," even though Mao's offer required the acceptance of Chinese sovereignty. For most of the elite, particularly the more religious and conservative sectors, the idea of the Dalai Lama in exile was unacceptable. They believed that with the Dalai Lama in Tibet, Tibetan religion and culture could be preserved. By the end of 1952, therefore, it was clear that the Dalai Lama was not going to flee from Tibet, so an active U.S. interest in Tibet diminished. It remained quiescent until the end of 1955, when the United States again became interested in Tibet, this time with regard to unrest in Kham/Sichuan and the possibility of supporting a Khamba insurgency through the Dalai Lama's brother Gyalo Thondup.

Consequently, although the Dalai Lama returned in the summer of 1955 to a calm Tibet and was enthusiastic about modernizing Tibet and improving the lives of poor Tibetans, in the distance, dark storm clouds from several directions were already forming on the horizon. They would soon sweep into Tibet, challenging his hopes and views and calling into question his very understanding of the situation. How he, his leading officials, and the Chinese officials in Beijing and Lhasa would deal with this storm will be the focus of the next volume.