

On Modern Tibetan History: Moving Beyond Stereotypes¹

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Introduction

Our understanding of post-1950 Tibetan history has been constrained by an overly simplistic approach that analyzes Sino-Tibetan relations as if “Tibetans” and “Chinese” were really two homogeneous entities. Adherence to this perspective has distorted our understanding of the modern period and obscured essential intra-Tibetan and intra-Chinese differences. This overview essay illustrates the need for a more nuanced approach to modern Tibetan history by briefly examining a major strategic conflict in the Chinese Communist Party in Tibet² and its interaction with different elements within Tibet.

The End of Defacto Independence

The victory of the Chinese communist party (CCP) over the Guomindang (GMD) in 1949 began a new chapter in Sino-Tibetan relations that quickly ended four decades of Tibetan de-facto independence.

In 1913, after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, the 13th Dalai Lama expelled all Manchu/Chinese officials and troops from Tibet and unilaterally declared that Tibet would be ruled without any outside interference. These acts created a de-facto independent Tibet that maintained its own army and government, used its own language and currency and regulated movement across its borders.

This new status, however, was contested by the post-Qing Chinese government which continued to insist vociferously that Tibet was jurally a part of China, although, at the time, it was unable to exercise any authority there. The Tibetan government, therefore, almost immediately found itself faced with a major threat since China might at any time try to reverse the political situation militarily. Key issues facing the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and his government included how to create a military force that could defend its contested status against China, how to secure recognition and/or protection from other countries such as Britain, or, alternatively, how to negotiate a mutually acceptable status with the new Chinese government.

As we know, Tibet successfully maintained its de-facto independence for 4 decades despite continuing Chinese protests and threats. However, it failed to obtain either a negotiated settlement with China or international acceptance of its unilaterally declared status. Moreover, its success in preserving its de-facto independence was deceptive. Beneath the surface, the seeds of Tibet's own destruction were present. Within the Tibetan political and religious elite, anti-modernization views prevailed and created a Tibet that was poorly prepared to defend its contested status. Tibet's success until 1950, in fact, was based more on historical serendipity than effective policies by the Tibetan government. A concatenation of fortuitous historical forces including the fall of the Qing Dynasty, the chaotic early years of the Republican and Nationalist governments in China, the Japanese invasion of China and then WWII, restrained China from imposing its view of the Tibet Question on Lhasa. In a sense, it allowed those in Tibet who feared modernization more than China, an illusion of victory.

The end of WW II began a shift in Tibet's historical "luck." The defeat of the AXIS ended the Tibet government's hope that a victory by Japan over China would solve the threat from Beijing. Similarly, the international community declined to include the Tibetan question in the post-WWII self-determination/ independence discussions despite doing so for Mongolia. And finally, the Civil War in China did not weaken China internally, at least for long.

So as the second half of the 20th century began, although Tibet was still operating as a de-facto independent polity, it now found itself confronted by a powerful and unified China that was committed to immediately incorporating Tibet into the People's Republic of China (PRC). The rest of the twentieth century would be consumed by both sides jockeying to adapt to the new reality.

Incorporation into the PRC

For Mao and the new Chinese Communist government, the key question was how to proceed to incorporate or from their perspective, reunify Tibet. It would have been easy, given the state of Tibet's military ineptness, for China simply to send in the battle-seasoned People's Liberation Army (PLA) and forcefully "liberate" Tibet as it had the rest of China. But it chose not to, except as a last resort. Instead it opted to achieve a "peaceful liberation," which in its jargon meant re-incorporation with the agreement of the Dalai Lama (the Tibetan government). The PRC went through a long carrot-and-stick process in order to compel the Dalai Lama and his government to agree to a formal written agreement accepting Chinese sovereignty over Tibet.

To make this incorporation more palatable, on the "carrot" side, Beijing proposed an ethnically sensitive policy that I have elsewhere called "gradualism."

Mao's gradualist policy for Tibet focused on working through the elites, especially the Dalai Lama, and *gradually* winning them over. Mao felt this strategy would avoid making Tibetans hostile and prone to splittist activities and would gradually convince them to genuinely accept being an integral part of China. It would also minimize the likelihood of attempts at political intervention by India or the West. Consequently, Beijing indicated that Tibetan language, religion and customs would be respected and maintained, and the Dalai Lama's government allowed to continue, at least for some period. Beijing, therefore, repeatedly called on the Dalai Lama to send a delegation to negotiate its "peaceful liberation."

The Tibetan government, however, initially refused to discuss terms of Tibet's incorporation into the PRC. It stalled sending a delegation to Beijing while it sought external military and political support from the West and the U.N. The Chinese responded to this situation by unleashing the "stick." In October 1950 it invaded Tibet's Eastern Province and captured the entire Tibetan army/administration in a two week campaign. This defeat, coupled with the absence of support from the West and India, led the Dalai Lama to finally send a delegation to Beijing in March of 1951. The resultant agreement they signed was called the "17 Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet." In it, Tibet accepted Chinese sovereignty and China agreed to permit the traditional government to continue to rule Tibet internally until such a time that the leaders and people of Tibet wanted reforms. The Agreement ended Tibet's claim of independence and de-internationalised the Tibet Question, but also gave Tibet a unique, and higher, status within the PRC. It was the only entity incorporated by a written agreement that left the traditional government in power internally.

At the time of the negotiations in Beijing, the Dalai Lama and his top officials were residing in Yadong, a town on the Indian border where they had moved so as to be able to easily flee into exile should the PLA invade central Tibet. The Chinese "gradualist" policy spelled out in the 17 Point Agreement persuaded the Dalai Lama to return to Lhasa, despite strong American pressure for them to flee Tibet and go into exile. This was a great victory for Mao's policy and initiated a new chapter in Tibetan and Chinese history.

The question for the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government now was what strategy or strategies they should pursue to meet their goals, and more basically, what should their goals be? For example, while the Tibetan government could no longer overtly claim independence, should they covertly continue to contest Chinese sovereignty, and if so how? Should they seek to renegotiate parts of the 17 Point Agreement, or conversely, should they themselves move to rapidly implement reforms to bring Tibet's social system more into line with that of the PRC? Space limitations preclude discussing this aspect of the internal Tibetan situation and it will have to suffice to say that there were different voices and strategies about what should be done.

Instead, let us turn to internal differences within the Chinese Communist Party in Tibet since this aspect of modern Tibetan history is poorly understood. The CCP in Tibet is usually portrayed as a unified entity but from the beginning it was enmeshed in a hotly contested dispute over policy and strategy between officials from the N.W. and S.W. Military-Administrative Bureaus.

Immediately after liberation, China was divided into six large regions, four of which were administrated by Military-Administrative Bureaus. These were considered transitional entities that would quickly be transformed into civilian "people's" governments when conditions stabilized. The N.W. Bureau was headed by Peng Dehuai and was associated with the First Army Corps (c. Diyi yezhang jun). Its catchment area included Qinghai, Gansu, Xinjiang, Ningxia and Shaanxi. The S.W. Bureau was headed by Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping and was associated with the Second Army Corps (c. Diar yezhang jun). Its catchment area included Sichuan, Xikang, Yunnan and Guizhou (and after 1951, Tibet).

The conflict was played out in the Tibet Work Committee (TWC) (c. Xizang gongwei). This was the Chinese government's leading administrative office in Tibet. All important issues on Tibet affairs were discussed and decided by it (in the sphere of the CCP's activities), although final decisions rested with Beijing.

Tensions existed between these two Bureaus going back to the Chamdo Campaign when virtually all of the credit for the victory went to the S.W. Bureau whose 18th Army captured Chamdo. The N.W. Bureau, however, also played a critical role in the victory.

The strategic goal of the Chamdo campaign was not to capture Chamdo per se, but rather to encircle and disable the entire Tibetan army deployed there. The Tibetan troops in Chamdo were the backbone of the Tibet government's army and the Chinese aim was to prevent these troops from returning to Central Tibet as a fighting force. Preventing this, they felt, would make total military conquest of Tibet easier if it came to that, but more importantly, would likely demoralize the Tibetan government and push them to acquiesce to "peaceful incorporation." Cutting off the road from Chamdo to Lhasa, therefore, was an essential goal of the campaign, and doing so required seizing control over the key bridge at Lagong Ngamda (south of Riwoche). That task fell to the 1st Cavalry of the N.W. Bureau under Fan Ming. They marched night and day from Jyekundo (in Qinghai Province) and arrived at the bridge just before Ngabö's forces arrived in flight from Chamdo. Their presence there led Ngabö to stop his retreat and surrender his forces. Ngabö actually surrendered to elements of the S.W. Bureau's 18th Army (who were pursuing Ngabö moving west from Chamdo), but his capture was made possible by the extraordinary effort of the N.W. Bureau's force.

There were also important differences between the N.W. Bureau and the S.W. Bureau concerning the position of the Panchen and Dalai Lamas. In the simplest terms, the N.W. Bureau supported the Panchen Lama (who was resident in their area) and the S.W. Bureau supported the Dalai Lama. In fact, in early November of 1950, the Central Committee had instructed the N.W. Bureau to prepare to accompany the Panchen Lama back to Shigatse and take responsibility for "Back Tibet" (c. Hou zang) and Western Tibet (c. Ali, t. Ngari). The S.W. Bureau would do the same for "Front Tibet" and the Dalai Lama (c. Qian zang). This classification was based on Qing Dynasty history which talks about a Front Tibet (Central Tibet held by the Dalai Lama) Tibet and a Back Tibet (the southwest area held by the Panchen Lama) as separate entities. In early 1951, however, the Central Committee changed their position. Although both the N.W. and S.W. Bureaus would still send troops to Tibet, it now decided that there should be a unified Tibet and that the TWC of the S.W. and N.W. Bureaus should merge into one new TWC after their troops and officials arrived in Lhasa.

Fan Ming's troops entered Tibet in December 1951, a little over a month after the main S.W. Bureau force under Zhang Guohua arrived. From the beginning, there were problems. Fan Ming was unhappy with his reception from both the Tibetan government and the PLA (S.W. Bureau) forces in Lhasa. The Tibetan government sent only a middle level 4th rank official to greet him outside Lhasa as was the custom, and neither Zhang Jingwu or Zhang Guohua went to greet him from the PLA side. While they considered Fan Ming's status lower than theirs, Fan Ming considered himself their equal. He saw himself as head of the N.W. Bureau's TWC just as Zhang Guohua was head of the S.W. Bureau's TWC. The fact that the S.W. Bureau had sent the majority of the troops did not change that for him.

Initially, Beijing appointed Zhang Guohua as the 1st party secretary of the new combined TWC, but almost immediately, due to these tensions, it rescinded this decision and appointed Zhang Jingwu as the 1st party secretary (with Zhang Guohua and Fan Ming as Vice Secretaries). Zhang Jingwu had come from Beijing to Tibet via India as the representative of Mao and the Central Committee to the Dalai Lama. He had been slated to return to Beijing after a few months and had not been attached to either of the two Bureau's TWC, nor was he included in the initial combined TWC. This shift meant that it was Zhang Jingwu who would now remain in Tibet. And it also meant that Fan Ming was not directly under Zhang Guohua's authority.

Fan Ming, moreover, was very successful in placing his people in key positions in the party's administration, in large part because the central government wanted to minimize conflict. Fan Ming, therefore, became Director of the very important United Front Bureau and two other top N.W. Bureau officials, Mu Shenzhong and Ya Hanzhang, became respectively Director of the Organization Bureau (which was in charge of personnel) and Secretary General of the Leadership Committee.

These organizational tensions were paralleled by two very different viewpoints on what should be done in Tibet. Zhang Guohua and the others of the S.W. Bureau followed Mao's position that it is necessary to keep nationality and religion uppermost in mind when working in Tibet and to not push for quick reforms. This view held that the Tibetan Government and the Dalai Lama should be placed in the priority position in Tibet, and that winning over the Dalai Lama was the key to gaining long-term stability and security for China in Tibet. Mao also supported postponing implementation of terms of the 17 Point Agreement that the Tibetan government was uncomfortable with, e.g., the creation of a Military-Administrative Bureau in Tibet.

Mao advocated this because he understood the unique difficulties China faced in Tibet because of its theocratic government, conservative and religious populace and the absence of resident Chinese. Consequently, he felt it was critical to go slow and make a favorable impression on the Lhasa elite in order to secure China's long term interests—i.e., genuinely winning over Tibetans to being part of China. In 1951, for example, when Zhang Guohua was about to leave Beijing for Tibet, Mao told him that when he arrived in Lhasa and met the Dalai Lama he should prostrate before the Dalai Lama in accordance with Tibetan custom. When Zhang Gouhua responded to Mao that he thought a salute would be enough, Mao got angry and told him, "Zhang Guohua, you have sweated and shed blood for the revolution so why can't you prostrate three times for the revolution?" Zhang did not respond (Anonymous interview). [Actually, when Zhang Guohua reached Lhasa and had his initial "ceremonial" meeting with the Dalai Lama, he paid his respects by giving the Dalai Lama a Tibetan scarf

and a traditional ritual offering called Mendre tensum. But he did not prostrate. Instead, he asked the ranking Tibetan cadre in the TWC to prostrate in his place.]

Fan Ming (and the other senior officials of the N.W. Bureau in Lhasa), on the other hand, felt strongly that it was futile to try to win over the Lhasa religious and secular elite to reform Tibet. They considered them hopelessly reactionary and splittists, and argued that the best thing for China was to eliminate their power and authority as quickly as possible and implement the 17 Point Agreement fully. The status of the Panchen Lama was a major issue for him.

Based on the Qing Dynasty's notion of a Front and Back Tibet as separate entities, Fan Ming rejected the position that the Panchen Lama was traditionally subordinate to the Dalai Lama politically. Because of this, and because the Panchen Lama and his officials were considered "progressives," he felt that the CCP should be favoring them not the reactionary Lhasa elite.

The Ninth Panchen Lama had fled to exile in China in 1924 together with his top officials after a dispute with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama over taxes and autonomy. After this flight, the Tibetan government took control of the Panchen Lama's many landed estates. In subsequent years, the Panchen Lama tried to negotiate a rapprochement with the Tibetan government from exile in China but was unsuccessful and he died in Qinghai Province in 1937. The search for a new incarnation of the Panchen Lama was started and led to Lhasa identifying several candidates while the retinue of the late Panchen Lama (still in exile in China) also discovered a candidate in Qinghai Province. The Panchen Lama's officials insisted their candidate was the true reincarnation, but Lhasa would not recognize this. Instead it said that the Qinghai candidate must be sent to Lhasa for tests and the Dalai Lama's final decision. The Panchen Lama's retinue refused to acquiesce and unilaterally recognized their candidate as the new Tenth Panchen Lama. Although the Dalai Lama did not recognize this selection, the Panchen Lama's retinue secured China's recognition. In June, 1949, just before the GMD fled the mainland for Taiwan, it officially recognized the Qinghai boy (who was then eleven years old) as the new Panchen Lama. Although this, in large part, was an attempt to persuade the Panchen Lama's retinue to flee to Taiwan with them, they did not. Instead the Panchen Lama's officials opened cordial relations with the PLA in Qinghai (the N.W. Bureau). They supported China's reform policies for Tibet and Tibet's status as an integral part of China. For example, on the inauguration day of the People's Republic of China (October 1, 1949) the Panchen Lama sent Mao a telegram accepting that Tibet was a part of China and pledging, on behalf of the Tibetan people, wholehearted support for the liberation of Tibet. From the beginning then, the Panchen Lama and his retinue had close relations with the N.W. Bureau and the CCP. Thus, Fan Ming's perception of them as "progressives."

Fan Ming felt that China's interests were best met by implementing democratic reforms soon and argued that considering the Panchen Lama's area as an autonomous political entity equal to that of the Dalai Lama would facilitate this. His logic was that if the Panchen Lama headed his own autonomous region (the Back Tibet), he would quickly initiate the process of land reforms in his territory. When knowledge of this spread to the Dalai Lama's region it would raise the consciousness of the peasants there and motivate them to demand land reforms. This, in turn, would force the Dalai Lama's government to yield. This can be thought of as the "hard-line strategy" in the CCP in the 1950s. This faction's strategy held that the best way to create stability and

security for the CCP in Tibet was to de-emphasize concerns about religious, cultural and ethnic differences and emphasize class struggle so as to quickly transform Tibet like the rest of China.

Although Mao Zedong had apparently already decided against this, Fan Ming and the Panchen Lama interpreted Mao's call for a "unified" Tibet not to mean unifying the Panchen Lama *under* the Dalai Lama. Rather they argued that there should be two equivalent units (Back and Front Tibet) unified under the higher authority of the unified CCP, as, they claimed, had been the case in Tibetan history.

Zhang Guohua, however, strongly opposed this interpretation, although, to be sure, like Fan Ming, he abhorred the Tibetan feudal-like manorial estate system. Zhang Guohua accepted and supported the Tibetan government's contention that the Panchen Lama's administration historically had been subordinate to Lhasa and consequently felt it was necessary to work through the Dalai Lama. These issues became alive after the Panchen Lama and his entourage arrived from exile first to Lhasa and then, in June 1952, to his seat of power in Shigatse/Tashilhunpo.

Not long after this, a number of disputes and conflicts regarding the status of the Panchen Lama's government arose, and in September, 1952, the Central Committee sent Fan Ming to Shigatse to talk with both the Panchen Lama's officials and the Shigatse Branch of the TWC (that was headed by N.W. Bureau officials) to try to calm the situation. But matters actually got worse since Fan Ming supported their views on the autonomous status of the Panchen Lama.

A quote of one of the actors from the N.W. Bureau will convey a feel for the level of thinking that existed in October, 1952:

Now they [the TWC in Lhasa] sent ... this telegram, urging Ya Hanzhang [the N.W. Bureau official accompanying the Panchen Lama] ... to persuade the Panchen Lama to surrender to the Kashag unconditionally, and thus to complete the unification of Tibet. ... We believed that Panchen could only unify with a patriotic Kashag, not a pro-independence Kashag. If we sent the two progressive regions [Shigatse and Chamdo] to this pro-separation Kashag, we would actually be helping them. We would hurt our friends and help our enemies. We did not agree with the telegram. We sent a telegram to the central committee with their telegram attached (Anonymous interview).

This is an incorrect depiction of the sequence of events in this incident, but it illustrates the level of discord within the CCP in Tibet, as well as the degree to which different factions in the CCP were allied with different factions within Tibet.

From then on, the conflict between the Fan Ming and Zhang Guohua factions over the Panchen Lama increased in intensity until the Central Committee was forced to convene a meeting to discuss this issue in Beijing in 1953. That Conference went on for about 6 months and was so vitriolic that Deng Xiaoping sarcastically dubbed it "Panmunjom" after the bitter peace negotiations in Korea. In the end, Mao decided this issue by directing that the Dalai Lama was superior and the Panchen Lama was subordinate, and when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama visited Beijing for the first time in 1954-55, he was unambiguously treated as the higher figure. The Dalai Lama's visit to Beijing also played a major role in this CCP dispute. Because the Dalai Lama

expressed very progressive views regarding reforms and modernization while in China, Mao, the Central Committee, and the S.W. Bureau people saw this as confirmation that their position of working through him had been correct.

However, soon after the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa in 1955, the start of democratic reforms in Sichuan Province in January 1956 precipitated a rebellion in Kham (which was part of Sichuan Province). As this rebellion was put down, an influx of Tibetan rebels and refugees straggled into Lhasa from Kham. This set the groundwork for the development of a guerrilla group in Lhasa, and at the same time, led to Tibetan dissidents in India (headed by the Dalai Lama's brother Gyalo Thundrup) linking up with the CIA to train and arm Tibetan rebel forces. Fan Ming argued that the Dalai Lama was secretly behind this. He felt that the Dalai Lama had been duplicitous when he was in Beijing and was really covertly organizing and supporting the rebellion in Kham (and Tibet).

At about the same time, Fan Ming used Mao's 1955 call for rapid collectivization of agriculture in China to justify orchestrating a major effort to begin trial reforms in Tibet. In 1956, he recruited thousands of Chinese cadre from inland China (c. *neidi*), created new Tibetan cadre in Tibet, and developed a plan to start trial democratic reforms in the winter of 1956 (in Chamdo and the Panchen Lama's regions).

Mao and the Central Committee however, were still committed to work through the Dalai Lama, who was then in India attending the Buddha Jayanti Celebration. They terminated the plan for trial reforms in Tibet and ordered major reductions in personnel and activities. Thousands of Tibetan and Han Chinese cadre were sent back to inland China or demobilized. Beijing, therefore, continued to pursue Mao's policy of trying to work through the Dalai Lama.

Soon after this, in April 1958, the Fan Ming dispute was finally set to rest when Fan Ming was arrested in Tibet and sent back to prison in China as Tibet's "ultra-rightist who was trying to split the unity of Tibet".

But while Fan Ming was gone and Beijing's "Dalai Lama policy" retained, Mao's strategy was about to disintegrate. Less than a year later, the March 1959 uprising occurred in Lhasa and the Dalai Lama fled to exile in India. Chinese sovereignty over Tibet was again contested vigorously on the world stage. Mao's gradualist strategy had failed to achieve the goal he had envisioned in 1949-50.

Beijing immediately jettisoned the gradualist policy and implemented a hard-line strategy involving land reforms and the immediate termination of the Tibetan government and virtually all monasteries. For the next 20 years, Tibetan culture and ethnicity would be minimized and prominence given to class struggle and Tibetans adopting the national socialist culture.

Moreover, within the CCP, many now quietly came to accept that it had been a mistake for the communist party to, in their view, "coddle" Tibet's religious elites and institutions, and in particular the Dalai Lama. They blamed the party's gradualist strategy for the 1959 rebellion and the re-internationalization of the Tibet Question, and today some in China consider this gradualist policy one of the party's (Mao's) greatest failures. They argued that the Dalai Lama had duped China's leadership and that if China had eliminated the old system quickly as Fan Ming advocated there would have been *no revolt and no Dalai Lama in exile*.

The Post-Mao era

The rise of Deng Xiaoping raised the question in Beijing of whether it was possible for “reformist” China to settle the Tibet Question by opening a new dialogue with the Dalai Lama. In the course of this reexamination, it became evident to the leaders in Beijing that the hard-line approach of the past two decades in Tibet had been a failure. Tibet was still very poor and a large segment of the masses continued to support the Dalai Lama. This led Hu Yaobang and the Central Committee to launch a new strategy of conciliation in which Tibetan ethnicity, culture and religion would be valorized and allowed to function widely. It was, in reality, a reversal back to something akin to the earlier ethnically conciliatory views of Mao where genuinely winning over Tibetans was the goal. By allowing Tibetans to express their culture and values more fully while helping Tibetans to improve their standard of living, the reform policy in Tibet sought to genuinely win over Tibetans to being “satisfied” citizens of China.

However, like 1951, from the start, there was a hard-line faction within the CCP and Army that warned that this road was a mistake that would end up like the fiasco of the 1950s. They argued that allowing Tibetan religion to reemerge would fan the flames of rebellion and separatism, and should not be done. This faction, which included Han and Tibetan cadres, however, initially was not successful in persuading Beijing to its views (just as Fan Ming had been unsuccessful earlier), and many moves to bolster Tibetan language, culture and religion were implemented.

However, events soon gave the Han and Tibetan hard-liners the leverage they needed. The failure of the negotiations with the Dalai Lama’s government in the early-mid 1980s, the start of the Dalai Lama’s international campaign in 1987, and the series of riots in Tibet in 1987-89, turned the tables just as the rebellion in 1959 had. The pro-reform Party Secretary (Wu Jinghua) was replaced, martial law was imposed, and from then on we see a return to the dominance of a more hard-line point of view where fostering higher levels of Tibetan religion, language and culture are seen as counter-productive to China’s national interests. It also saw the reemergence of the view that the Dalai Lama was acting duplicitously and was untrustworthy to work with. This new hard-line policy promoted what we can think of as a “small ethnicity” model that treated economic development as far more important than ethnic development and aimed at fostering a high degree of integration of Tibetans with the rest of China. That remains the policy today.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to illustrate, cursorily to be sure, that to understand the history of Tibet during the last five decades we have to go beyond simplistic black and white arguments that contrast Chinese views and Tibetans views, and move to a more nuanced approach that examines important alternative views on both sides. We need to go beyond talking about “Chinese” and “Tibetans” as if they were uniform entities and begin to unravel the internal debates, disagreements and conflicts, interpreting how these interacted to drive goals and strategies on both sides – just as we would do for American or European history.

¹ Parts of this paper have been adapted from M. C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet and the Dalai Lama*, U. of California Press, 1997, and M. C. Goldstein, *The History of Modern Tibet, 1951-1955*, ms.

² Tibet here refers to political Tibet, the polity ruled by the Dalai Lama. It does not include the various ethnic Tibetan areas in Kham and Amdo.

DISCUSSION

THE 1950's

There was considerable discussion concerning the interpretation of events in the 1950s. During the 1912-50 period Tibet had functioned as a de facto independent country, but its independence had not been recognised and China continued to claim Tibet as part of its domains. Following the triumph of communism in China, Chinese forces invaded Tibet in October 1950 and forced the Tibetans to sign the 1951 Agreement by which Tibet was absorbed into the new Chinese state. After a turbulent decade of communist rule in Tibet, the 14th Dalai Lama fled into exile in 1959 with around 80-100,000 of his people, and established a government-in-exile in Dharamsala, north India. This transitional decade, and the decades following it, has until recently been greatly neglected by historians, but was of crucial importance for the future of the Tibetan peoples.

One factor of some historical interest was the question of the respective roles of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, and their individual interests in and communications with China and India. Both were young men in the 1950s, and relied upon various advisors, whose influences and actions should be assessed.

It was noted that the 1950s were a crucial era in which there were many different factions, ideas of the future, and even a willingness by both parties to reach a successful accommodation. Indeed debate continues within both Chinese and Tibetan systems over the decisions made and actions taken during this period, as it does among historians.

For Chinese communists the events of 1950 represented the reunification of China; but for the Tibetans this was an invasion, and the fact that Tibet was the only entity in China with which the Communist Party felt it was necessary to sign a written agreement demonstrated the unique status of Tibet and the consequent Chinese desire to claim a firm legal justification for their actions. But while there were differences within Chinese policy-making circles over annexation and ruling strategies there were no fundamental differences of intent; all parties within the Chinese elite structure were agreed on the necessity of taking over Tibet.

Bell's entry: "Monks of Gyantse Monastery"
Photographer: David MacDonald
BL.P.323