Profile

Tibetans are composed of a number of related ethnic groups sharing linguistic and cultural similarities. Some of these include the Ü-Tsang of Central Tibet, the tent-dwelling Drokpa nomads of the high plateau and the Khambas. The number of Tibetans in China is a matter of controversy: they may number anywhere between 5 million and 7 million people in Tibet and the neighbouring provinces of Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan. According to the official 2010 Census, Tibetans comprise roughly 90.5 per cent of the population of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), or around 3 million Tibetans, with Han Chinese making up 8.17 per cent – a figure that however does not include many Han migrants, military forces and their families resident for extended periods in Tibet. Tibetan populations elsewhere in China are said to raise the total number of Tibetans living in China to 6 million or more.

Most Tibetans observe Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhism. Some also follow indigenous traditions known as Bön, while there is a small Muslim Tibetan minority known as Kache. In linguistic terms, there are several related Tibetan languages within the Tibeto-Burman family of languages. In addition to Central Tibetan, which is spoken in Lhasa, the variants spoken in Kham and Amdo are usually considered as distinct languages, as are more remotely related languages such as Dzongkha, Sherpa and Ladakhi. While a majority of Tibetans live in the TAR, there are millions living in neighbouring parts of China, especially in areas that were historically part of traditional Tibet but were subsequently 'excised' by authorities of the People’s Republic of China. Part of the Khams’ traditional homeland in eastern Tibet, for example, was split between the Tibet Autonomous Region and Sichuan province in 1955.

Historical context

The Tibetans were nomadic groups who are thought to have established themselves in the Tibetan plateau since about the Iron Age. From the seventh to the eleventh century, the Tibetan Empire extended at times over vast territories, reaching as far as Bengal to the south and Mongolia to the north, though central Tibetan rule was at times more symbolic than real from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. The Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century then brought both China and Tibet into a complex relationship: Tibet came under the sphere of the Mongol Empire, with Chinese historians claiming that this marks the incorporation of Tibet into
China, though others point out that both Tibet and China had been added to the Mongol Empire as separate entities.

There was to be a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity to the relationship between Tibet and China for centuries. In 1717, Lhasa was sacked and occupied by Dzungar Mongols, who were only removed with the assistance of imperial Chinese soldiers. From this moment on the Chinese presence remained continuous in Tibetan political affairs, though whether this represented the exercise of some sort of authority or not remains a matter of contention to this day. Though there were treaties signed which seemed to recognize some form of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, Chinese direct intervention was infrequent over the next two centuries, and some Dalai Lamas acted with complete independence. For example, the 13th Dalai Lama refused to recognize the validity of a British-Chinese trade treaty affecting Tibet until he was forced to in 1904 by British intervention.

The end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the subsequent Chinese Civil War of the 1920s and 1930s and the eruption of the Second World War gave Tibetans the opportunity to reassert their independence. It seems that Tibetan authorities started to more clearly present their status as that of an independent state mainly after 1942, but few other countries responded openly or favourably to these overtures. This lack of international support laid the ground for the later travails of the Tibetans after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Soon afterwards in 1950, the People’s Liberation Army crushed the Tibetan army in Chamdo, and in 1951 a Seventeen-Point Agreement was signed by Tibetan representatives – under duress according to some – and ratified in Lhasa just a few months later.

However, pre-1950 Tibet was by most accounts a quasi-feudal theocracy, and Chinese authorities soon began to attack many of these aspects of Tibetan society. Depictions of an oppressive feudal state ruled by an elite Dalai Lama are common in Chinese government historical narratives and used to attack the Dalai Lama, arguing that the Chinese occupation was a force for liberation of ordinary Tibetans. This narrative is largely used to excuse ongoing repression in contemporary Tibet and delegitimize the Dalai Lama. Land reforms and the loss of the lamas’ traditional power led first to unrest in eastern Kham and Amdo in the mid-1950s. The Great Leap Forward period (during which anywhere between 200,000 and 1 million Tibetans may have died) was also one during which there was growing disdain shown by Chinese authorities to the traditional Tibetan religious and political leaders such as the Dalai Lama. This contributed to other existing grievances and led to a full-scale uprising in Lhasa on 10 March 1959, with some 300,000 gathering outside the Potala Palace. Two days later, thousands of Tibetan women again demonstrated outside of Potala Palace, what has become known as Women’s Uprising Day, an event the modern Tibetan Women’s Association credits with its origins. Around the world, 10 March is still observed as Tibetan Uprising Day, and in China it is preceded by a major security clampdown in the TAR.

The uprisings in March 1959 were brutally suppressed, and within a week the Dalai Lama fled to Dharamsala, in India, where he and the Tibetan Government in Exile remain to this day. Successive waves of Tibetan refugees have followed, often forced to journey along treacherous Himalayan crossings because China tightly controls the freedom of movement.
The 1960s would see a worsening of the treatment of Tibetans as the country was swept into the maelstrom of the Cultural Revolution: thousands upon thousands of monasteries and cultural sites were either destroyed or badly damaged by the Red Guards, sacred books were burned, and thousands of monks and nuns were imprisoned, tortured or killed. The targeting of any religious symbols or figures was common throughout China during the Cultural Revolution and Tibetan temples along with monks and nuns were assaulted as far from the TAR as Beijing and elsewhere in the country.

While the worst atrocities of the Cultural Revolution have ceased and Chinese authorities have embarked on a vast programme of economic and infrastructure development for the TAR, incidents of ill-treatment and torture, and of severe restrictions on non-authorized religious or cultural expression have continued with varying degrees since the 1970s. In recent years, notably under Chen Quanguo, Communist Party Sectary of the TAR from 2011 to 2016, near totalitarian controls on the freedom of movement as well as tightly repressive measures against religious freedom, linguistic and other cultural rights, have targeted virtually every aspect of Tibetan life, while favoring Han transmigration.

**Current issues**

In many respects, Tibetans seem to be treated more harshly than most other minorities in China, probably out of fear of Tibet seeking to regain its independence. What this has amounted to in practice is that China has equated virtually any nonviolent advocacy of Tibetan rights as a call to Tibetan independence manipulated by foreign forces under the so-called Dalai Clique. China’s securitization of Tibet is undoubtedly also related to its strategic location and its valuable resources.

In March 2008, Tibetans took to the streets to observe the anniversary of the failed 1959 uprising against Chinese rule and express grievances of ongoing rights abuses. Some in the crowds turned against Han Chinese targets, including looting and destroying shops. This prompted government forces to use teargas and live rounds in response. The protests flared up over several days as Beijing poured more security personnel into the region and attempted to seal off the TAR. Anti-government protests spread among Tibetans in Gansu, Sichuan and Qinghai provinces, as well as among expatriate Tibetans and their sympathizers in India, Nepal, and around the world. According to Beijing, 19 people were killed and more than 600 wounded in Tibet. Tibet’s government in-exile placed the number of dead at more that 200. Thousands may have been arrested, and in April 2008, the Chinese government sentenced 30 Tibetans to lengthy prison sentences for their alleged roles in rioting. Following lengthy investigations by Human Rights Watch, in 2010 it was revealed that Chinese forces violated international law, especially prohibitions on the use of disproportionate force, torture and arbitrary detention, as well as unaddressed disappearances and persecution of family members targeted for sympathizing with the uprising. In the years since, China has dramatically escalated its security presence leading up to the anniversary. In early March 2017, authorities in Lhasa conducted a major military parade involving some 5,000 troops – far larger than the one a year earlier.
Videos of China’s excessive crackdown on the predominantly nonviolent demonstrators in Lhasa in 2008 spread quickly on YouTube and other social media sites. Images of monks surrounded and beaten by Chinese police shocked international audiences. Global outrage prompted the Human Rights Torch Relay, a parallel march along the Olympic Torch Relay route that drew attention to the crackdown in Lhasa and other human rights concerns in China. To control the narrative, China blocked YouTube, which remains inaccessible in China. China maintains one of the most sophisticated networks of censorship and internet control to this day.

Tibetan exiles were split on how to proceed, with some advocating more radical opposition to Chinese rule than that contemplated by the Dalai Lama. Talks between the Chinese government and representatives of the Dalai Lama in May 2008 were inconclusive, but the sides agreed to meet again. However, there have been no meetings between Dalai Lama representatives and China since 2010, and China has gone out of its way to threaten and intimidate foreign governments who have met with the Dalai Lama.

One issue of growing importance for Tibetans is their increasingly weak position within the structures of government and in the labour force. While some Tibetans, like some Mongols and Uyghurs, are benefiting from China’s economic boom, such benefits are minimal considering their numbers in the TAR and neighbouring regions. By and large Tibetans are disproportionately left out of the most lucrative employment and socially advantageous positions – most often through the refusal of state authorities to effectively use Tibetan as a language of administration and services, which would open the doors of employment for Tibetans in the state machinery.

If one accepts the doubtful official figure of Tibetans constituting around 90 per cent of the population of TAR, the relatively low presence of Tibetans in many areas of employment is completely out of proportion (with unemployment among the youth sometimes put at 70-80 per cent). Their under-representation is linked, among other things, to a lack of fluency in Mandarin required for well-paid jobs, as well as already existing bias against the recruitment of ethnic Tibetans.

Despite Tibetans being an absolute majority in the TAR, their language has little or no status for employment purposes in the significant state sector: bilingualism thus does not in practice appear to offer any advantage for Tibetans since the state’s machinery and employment practices privilege almost exclusively fluency in Mandarin, and almost completely disregards the value of Tibetan as a language of work and employment in the region’s civil service.

This seems to have been confirmed with reports in 2006 indicating that access to permanent employment in the public sector has become subject to an exam held in Mandarin, placing Tibetans in general at a serious disadvantage: 80 per cent of rural Tibetans have no Mandarin-language skills and many of those who do may have mediocre or limited fluency, effectively further restricting their opportunities to find permanent jobs in the most privileged forms of employment. Contrary to what would seem to be stated in the 2002 Regulation of the
Learning, Using and Development of Tibetan Language and Script in TAR, and other language legislation, language policies in Tibet clearly breach the rights of the Tibetan minority and are therefore discriminatory.

The Constitution provides that all nationalities have the freedom to use and develop their own written and spoken language. The Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law, further notes that educational organizations with mostly ethnic minority students should strive to rely on textbooks and instruction in their own language. The 2010 national plan on education reform places similar emphasis on linguistic minority rights. It states that no effort shall be spared to advance bilingual teaching and that minority rights to education in their native language shall be ensured. Despite such legislation, the trend has been to move increasingly towards Mandarin as the exclusive language of instruction at the higher levels of secondary education. University education in Tibet is now almost exclusively in Mandarin. The educational system in Tibet is thus one of a ‘language replacement’ type of bilingualism, with the emphasis on replacing Tibetan with Mandarin. This may also go some way to explaining the huge discrepancy between Tibetan and migrant Han academic success in TAR: taught in a language and culture with which they are more familiar, three times more Han migrants than Tibetans graduate from universities, and five times more from senior middle school. Tibetan language rights advocates have been targeted. Emblematic is the recent case of Tashi Wangchuk, who in January 2016 was detained on suspicion of inciting separatism for speaking out against language policies in a 2015 New York Times video.

The above must be considered in the context of the Chinese government’s economic and development activities, epitomized by the Western Development Strategy. Beginning in January 2000, this policy officially was to bring the western and northern parts of the country up to similar levels of development to those of China’s eastern coastal regions (through projects to develop infrastructure such as transport and telecommunications). For Tibet, this has resulted in, among others, the creation of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, creating for the first time in 2006 a direct link between the TAR and China proper.

This has progressed alongside a massive urbanization drive. Between 2006 and 2012, China forcibly relocated over 2 million Tibetans. The Tibetan Center on Human Rights and Democracy has argued that Tibetans who have been forcibly relocated in this fashion should be considered as Internally Displaced Persons. Urbanization in the TAR hit 25.7 per cent in 2014, with the government projecting 30 per cent by 2020. This projected urban growth is closely linked to Han transmigration, confirming Tibetan suspicions that the project is also linked to the objective of consolidating Chinese control over Tibet.

At the same time, since 2012 travel restrictions imposed on Tibetans in the TAR have resulted in a near-complete restriction on the freedom of movement, especially for foreign travel. Tibetans are sometimes forced to wait upwards of five years for a passport or are denied outright, without any justification. The denial of new passports under Party Secretary Chen Quanguo occurred apace with orders to recall existing passports for Tibetans across the region. Such restrictions discriminate against Tibetans and directly target their religious and cultural rights, in denying their ability to legally participate in important Buddhist observances in
India.

Foreign tourists and especially journalists are tightly monitored and controlled in where they can travel and stay. Foreigners are not allowed, for example, to stay in Tibetan homes or guesthouses but only officially approved government hotels. Han tourists are allowed to stay at Han guesthouses, however. Not only do such controls limit Tibetan economic opportunities, they also further restrict the ability of Tibetans to express their grievances or for foreign travelers or journalists to report on rights violations.

During the period February 2009 to August 2017, some 150 Tibetans have self-immolated in protest of ongoing rights violations and marginalization. Many report the violent crackdown on Tibetans in 2008 and subsequent Chinese policies as the reason for their self-immolation, such as Lobsang Palden who self-immolated in 2014 in Ngaba county on ‘Martyrs’ Street,’ renamed for its frequent self-immolations. Many have called out their support for the Dalai Lama or for the release of the Panchen Lama, who was disappeared in May 1995. The numbers of self-immolators includes 26 Tibetans under the age of 18 and at least 119 are known to have died as a result of their self-immolation. Self-immolations peaked in 2012, with over 80 individuals setting themselves on fire. Although the numbers have decreased, Chinese collective punishment and coercive measures against those who attempt to self-immolate, their family members, or anyone thought to sympathize with them have drastically increased.

China has treated self-immolation as a terrorist act for several years, detaining and arresting family members and friends. In December 2016, following Tashi Rabten’s self-immolation in Gansu, police detained and reportedly tortured his wife and daughters into signing a document that he was not protesting Chinese policies but suffered from problems at home. In March 2017, police in Kardze county detained some 200 Tibetans who had shown support following Pema Gyaltsen’s self-immolation.

Tibetans face daunting restrictions in exercising their rights in areas such as freedom of expression and religion. In January 2016 authorities announced the indefinite extension of police presence and surveillance measures in Tibetan villages and monasteries signaling no end to repressive intrusion into Tibetan cultural and religious freedom. Activities that might be seen as only remotely challenging the supremacy of the Communist Party or that are deemed too overtly sympathetic to the Dalai Lama can be punished as threats to state security, as can expressions of Tibetan resentment or nationalism. Arbitrary detention, disappearance, and deaths in custody of Tibetans remain a serious concern. In July 2015, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, a respected Tibetan monk, died while serving a life sentence his supporters claim was in response to his support of the Dalai Lama and promotion of Tibetan cultural institutions. The 65-year-old monk had been denied medical parole despite being in poor health preceding his death and when his family tried to visit the body they were repeatedly turned away. China’s Rules on the Handling of Deaths in Prison requires the delivery of the bodies of ethnic minorities ‘with respect to ethnic traditions.’ Tibetan Buddhism has specific funeral prayers and burial rituals but the authorities refused to release Tenzin’s body to his family and when protest over this denial of cultural rights erupted the police opened fire with live ammunition. The
authorities in other cases of Tibetans who died in police custody also refused to release the body to family members for traditional rites, such as with Lobsang Yeshi, a village leader and rights activist.

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