

Tibetans

Updated July 2008

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. Overall - and officially according to the 2000 Census- Tibetans are supposedly just over 92 per cent of the population of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), a figure generally considered as overblown as it does not include many ethnic Han Chinese. The 2000 Census gives the percentage of Han Chinese in the TAR at just over 6 per cent.

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 which 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 Dsungar 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. 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 revolt in Lhasa by 1959, which was soon crushed. The Dalai Lama eventually fled to Dharamsala, in India, where he and the Tibetan Government in Exile remain to this day.

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.

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.

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, as well as because of its strategic location and its valuable resources.

In March 2008, Tibetans took to the streets to protest on the anniversary of the failed 1959 revolt against Chinese rule. 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 than 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. Tibetan leaders feared that China's reaction, under the microscope of international scrutiny just a few months before the start of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, could be restrained. They feared a much stronger crackdown following the Olympics, including demographic engineering through an influx of Han Chinese arrivals on a much greater scale than has been the case to date. 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.

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 (thus infringing the Chinese Constitution of 1982), which would open the doors of employment for Tibetans in the state machinery.

If one accepts the doubtful official figure of Tibetans constituting around 92 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.

Chinese authorities provide most of the TAR economy through massive infrastructure projects and government staff salaries, with government sector employees earning salaries that are the third highest in China. While a number of Tibetans are employed in these, they are increasingly giving ground to new Han Chinese arrivals. Officially, for example, Han Chinese only represent about 6 per cent of the total population of TAR, yet by 2003 they constituted more than half of cadres permanently employed by government administration, while ethnic Tibetans' occupation of the same jobs has dropped from over 70 per cent to less than 50 per cent in just five years.

Similarly, though less dramatically, the Tibetan minority is losing ground in the total government staff and workers category, falling from about 71 per cent to 64 per cent between 1999 and 2003. The drop is actually more pronounced if one looks at the figures for permanent staff and workers: by 2003, the Tibetans only held 53 per cent of these, as opposed to work contracts.

Anecdotal evidence since 2003 suggests that the last three years may have seen an even more pronounced decline in government sector and infrastructure project employment levels for Tibetans. The importance of this form of employment in Tibet must not be underestimated: employment in both agriculture and informal work, where Tibetans tend to be concentrated, provides much lower income levels than the salary of state sector employees, which means that the latter are relatively privileged and are perceived to be at the top of the social hierarchy.

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 recently 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.

While authorities assert that the Tibetan language is used as the medium of instruction in primary schools, the trend in the last few years 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.

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 Tibet Autonomous Region and China proper. Critics have pointed out that this will facilitate an even greater influx of Han migrants into Tibet. Tellingly, most of the workers involved in the construction of the railway line were also Han Chinese, seeming to confirm Tibetan suspicions that the project is also linked to the objective of consolidating Chinese control over Tibet.

While the overall number of political prisoners has diminished in recent years, Tibetans still face daunting restrictions in exercising their rights in areas such as freedom of expression and religion. 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. For example, five monks were jailed in 2005 for publishing a poem which lauded two other monks serving a three-year jail term for advocating Tibetan independence.