

Tibet - Myth and Reality

- **A Brief History of Tibet before 20**

- **by American historian Foster Stockwell**

Western concepts of Tibet embrace more myth than reality. The idea that Tibet is an oppressed nation composed of peaceful Buddhists who never did anyone any harm distorts history. In fact the belief that the [Dalai Lama](#) is the leader of world Buddhism rather than being just the leader of one sect among more than 1,700 "Living [Buddhas](#)" of this unique Tibetan form of the faith displays a parochial view of world religions. The myth, of course, is an outgrowth of Tibet's former inaccessibility, which has fostered illusions about this mysterious land in the midst of the Himalayan Mountains – illusions that have been skilfully promoted for political purposes by the Dalai Lama's advocates. The myth will inevitably die, as all myths do, but until this happens, it would be wise to learn a few useful facts about this area of [China](#).

First, Tibet has been a part of China ever since it was merged into that country in 1239, when the Mongols began creating the [Yuan Dynasty](#) (1271-1368). This was before [Marco Polo](#) reached China from Europe and more than two centuries before Columbus sailed to the New World. True, China's hold on this area sometimes appeared somewhat loose, but neither the Chinese nor many Tibetans have ever denied that Tibet has been a part of China from the Yuan Dynasty to this very day. The early Tibetans evolved into a number of competing nomadic tribes and developed a religion known as Bon that was led by shamans who conducted rituals that involved the sacrifice of many animals and some humans. These tribes fought battles with each other for better grazing lands, battles in which they killed or made slaves of those they conquered. They roamed far beyond the borders of Tibet into areas of China's Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, Xinjiang, Gansu, and Qinghai.

Eventually one of these tribes, the Tubo, became the most powerful and took control of all Tibet. (The name Tibet

comes from Tubo.) During China's Tang Dynasty (618-907), Emperor Taizong improved relations with the Tubo king, [Songtsen Gampo](#), by giving him one of his daughters, Princess Wenzheng, in marriage. The Tubos, in response to this cementing of relations, developed close fraternal ties with the Tang court, and the two ruling powers regularly exchanged gifts. The princess arrived in Tibet with an entourage of hundreds of servants, skilled craftspeople, and scribes. She was a Buddhist, as were all of the Tang emperors, and so Buddhism entered Tibet mainly through her influence, only to be suppressed later by resentful [Bon](#) shamans. Some years later another Tang princess was married to another Tubo king, again to cement relations between the two rulers.

The fact that the Tibetans and the Chinese had united royal families and engaged actively in trade (Tibetan horses for tea of the Central Plain) didn't mean an absence of conflict between them. Battles occasionally occurred between [Tang](#) and Tubo troops, mostly over territorial issues. At one point in the 750s, the Tubos, taking advantage of a rebellion against the Tangs by other armed groups in China, raced on horseback across China to enter the Tang capital of [Chang'an](#). But, they couldn't hold the city. In 838, two pro-Bon ministers assassinated the Tubo king, and the Bon religion was re-established as the only acceptable religion in Tibet. Buddhists were widely persecuted and forced into hiding. Trade between Tibet and the interior areas continued during the [Five Dynasties](#) (907-960) and the [Song Dynasty](#) (960-1279) that followed the collapse of the Tang, although relations between the two ruling powers were limited. During this time Buddhism revived in Tibet as a result of the Buddhists' willingness to accommodate some [Bon](#) practices.

The form of Buddhism that resulted from this merging of the two religions was quite different from that of China and other countries in Southeast Asia, as well as from the form that had been practised previously in Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism, often called [Lamaism](#), appealed to the [Mongols](#), who conquered most of Russia,

parts of Europe, and all of China under the leadership of [Genghis Khan](#).

The Mongols, like the Tibetans, were tribal herders who had a religion of animism similar to Bon. When [Kublai Khan](#), the first Yuan emperor, appointed administrators to Tibet, he elevated the head of the Tibetan Buddhist [Sakya sect](#) to the post of leader of all Buddhists in China, thus giving this monk greater power than any Buddhist had ever held before -and probably since. Needless to say, the appointment irritated the leaders of the other Buddhist sects in Tibet and the much larger group of non-Tibetan Buddhists in China. But, they couldn't do anything to counter the wishes of the emperor. The Yuan Dynasty divided Tibet into a series of administrative areas and put these areas under the charge of an imperial preceptor. Furthermore, the Yuan court encouraged the growth of feudal estates in Tibet as a way to maintain control there.

When the Yuan Dynasty collapsed, it was replaced by the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), which wasn't composed of persons of Mongolian heritage. Tibet then became splintered because the Ming court adopted a policy of granting hereditary titles to many nobles and a policy of divide and rule. Although the Ming court conferred the honorific title of Desi (ruling lama) to the head of one of Tibet's most powerful families, the Rinpung family, they also bestowed enough official titles to his subordinates to encourage separatist trends within the local Tibetan society. One of these titles was given to the head of the newly founded [Gelugpa sect](#), better known as the Yellow sect. He later took on the title "Dalai Lama."

Tibet During the [Qing Dynasty](#).

The next and last dynasty, the Qing, came to power in 1644 and lasted until 1911. At the time of its founding, the most prominent Tibetan religious and secular leaders were the fifth Dalai Lama, the fourth [Panchen Lama](#), and [Gushri Khan](#). They formed a delegation that arrived at the Chinese capital, Beijing, in 1652. Before they

returned to Tibet the following year, the emperor officially conferred upon [Lozang Gyatso](#) (the then Dalai Lama), the honorific title "The Dalai Lama, Buddha of Great Compassion in the West, Leader of the Buddhist Faith Beneath the Sky, Holder of the [Vajra](#)." (Dalai is Mongolian for "ocean"; lama is a Tibetan word that means "guru.") The fifth Dalai Lama pledged his allegiance to the Qing government and in return, received enough gold and silver to build 13 new monasteries of the Yellow sect in Tibet. All successive reincarnations of the Dalai Lama have been confirmed by the central government in China, and this has become a historical convention practised to this very day. A later Qing emperor suspected the intentions of the seventh Dalai Lama, so he increased the power of the Panchen Lama (also of the Yellow sect). In 1713 the Qing court granted the title "[Panchen Erdeni](#)" to the fifth Panchen Lama, thus elevating him to a status similar to that given to the Dalai Lama (Panchen means "great scholar" in Sanskrit, and Erdeni means "treasure" in Manchu.)

The largest part of the Tibetan population (more than 90 percent) at that time was composed of serfs, who were treated harshly by the landlords and ruling monks. All monasteries had large tracts of land as well as a great number of serfs under their control. The ruling monks' exploitation of these serfs was just as severe as that of the aristocratic landlords. Serfs had no personal freedom from birth to death. They and their children were given freely as gifts or donations, sold or bartered for goods. They were, in fact, viewed by landlords as "livestock that can speak." As late as 1943, a high-ranking aristocrat named Tsemon Norbu Wangyal sold 100 serfs to a monk in the Drigung area for only four silver dollars per serf. If serfs lost their ability to work, the lord confiscated all their property, including livestock and farm tools. If they ran away and subsequently were captured, half their personal belongings were given to the captors while the other half went to the lords for whom they worked. The runaways then were flogged or even condemned to death. The lords used such inhuman tortures as gouging out eyes, cutting off feet or hands, pushing the condemned person over a cliff, drowning and beheading.

Numerous rebellions occurred over the years against this harsh treatment, and in 1347 alone (the seventh year of Yuan Emperor Shundi's reign), more than 200 serf rebellions occurred in Tibet.

Foreign Aggression

Foreign nations made numerous attempts to invade Tibet and take it away from China. These were repulsed by Chinese troops, and Tibetan fighters. The first such invasion took place in 1337 when Mohammed Tugluk of Delhi (in what is now India) sent 100,000 troops into the Himalayan area. During the second half of the 18th century, troops from the [Kingdom of Nepal](#) invaded Tibet twice in an attempt to expand Nepal's territory. During the 19th century, Britain competed with Russia in pouring large sums of money and many spies into a struggle to see which of the two might eventually occupy and control Tibet. When the British finally invaded Tibet, first in 1888 and again in 1903, the Russians were so involved in conflicts at home that they couldn't stop the British troops from pushing all the way to Lhasa. And the Qing government, having recently lost the [Opium Wars](#) to the British, did nothing either. The Tibetans, using spears, arrows, catapults and homemade guns, fought valiantly but to no avail against the invading British army and its big cannons and machine guns. The British withdrew after imposing "peace" terms and before the harsh winter began because they feared the Tibetan resistance would prevent supplies from getting through to the occupying troops, thereby causing them to starve to death.

The British signed a Convention with China in 1906, the second article of which stipulated that the British would no longer interfere with the administration of Tibet and that China had sovereignty over Tibet. But, they conveniently forgot the terms of this agreement when, the very next year, they signed a Convention with Russia that specified British "special interests" in Tibet. It would probably fill a book to detail the many ways the British, from that point, on tried to take over Tibet and make it a part of their colony of India. Yet, something needs to be said about the conference held at [Simla](#), India, in 1914.

Conference participants included representatives of the new [Nationalist](#) government of China that had overthrown the Qing Dynasty just two years before, plus Tibetans, and British-Indians. The British had blackmailed the Chinese into attending by threatening to withdraw their recognition of the new nationalist government and by saying they would work out an agreement with the Tibetans alone if the Chinese didn't participate. The Simla Conference failed because the Chinese and the 13th Dalai Lama both opposed the British plan to divide Tibet into two parts (Inner and Outer Tibet). The conference, however, did produce one document that since has caused dissension - a map drawn by the British representative Arthur H. McMahon that was never shown to the Chinese, although it was revealed secretly to the Tibetan delegates. McMahon's map showed a new boundary line that included three districts of Tibet - Monyul, Loyul, and Lower Zayul - within the territory of British India. This so-called "[McMahon Line](#)" first became public 23 years later when it appeared in a printed set of British documents related to the conference and other diplomatic matters. The McMahon Line became the basis for India's failed attempt to take over this part of Tibet in 1962. The British, who made a great show of their desire to have "independence for Tibet" at the Simla Conference, in drawing this map were adding 90,000 square kilometers (an area three times the size of Belgium) from Tibet's natural territory to their own Indian colony.

During and after World War II and shortly before Britain's departure from India, the American Office of Strategic Services ([O.S.S.](#), the forerunner of the [C.I.A.](#)), operating under Cold War guide lines, joined the British Foreign Office as the instigator of the Tibetan "freedom movement." Much of what the O.S.S. did in Tibet remains hidden in secret files at C.I.A headquarters near Washington, D.C., but one of their plots has been widely reported. It involved a smear campaign launched against the regent who had been appointed to act for the young [14th Dalai Lama](#) after the [13th Dalai](#) died in 1933. The regent was hostile to U.S./British intrigues in Tibet, so the O.S.S. spread rumours about his alleged

incompetence and criminal activities. Eventually these charges led to the regent's arrest and murder in a Tibetan prison. The 14th Dalai Lama's father subsequently was poisoned because he was a friend and supporter of the regent.

Tibetan Buddhism

Before considering Tibet today, some words should be said about [Tibetan Buddhism](#) as a religion.

The accommodations it made with Bon resulted in its becoming very different from other forms of Buddhism, particularly from the more common and much larger [Chan Buddhism](#) of China (called Zen in Japan). Images found in Tibetan Buddhist temples are much fiercer than those found in other Buddhist temples, and some Tibetan ceremonies that once used human skulls, human skin, and fresh human intestines clearly reflect the animistic elements of Bon. Also, Tibetan Buddhists rely a great deal on prayer wheels, which most other Buddhists scorn. These are mechanical devices with prayers written on them that are constantly turned by water or wind so the forces of nature do the work of sending prayers to heaven. The reincarnation of Living Buddhas, which is unique to this form of Buddhism, began as early as 1294 with the [Karma Kagyu](#) sect, a sub-sect of the [Kagyu](#) sect (known as the black hats). It then spread to all of Tibetan Buddhism's other sects and monasteries, but it didn't reach the [Gelugpa](#) sect (Yellow sect - the one that includes the Dalai and Panchen Lama lines) until after 1419.

From the beginning, the system of selecting Living Buddhas was open to abuse because it was easy for clever members of the monk selection committee to manipulate the objects presented to potential child candidates in order to make sure a particular child was chosen. In the case of the fourth Dalai Lama, the child selected was the great-grandson of the Mongolian chief [Altan Khan](#). He was chosen at a time when the Gelugpa sect badly needed the protection of the Altan Khan's followers because

the Gelugpa were being persecuted by the older Tibetan sects, which were jealous of the Yellow sect's rapid growth.

Tibet Since 1949

In 1949, the [Chinese Communists](#) won the revolution and overthrew the Nationalist government. But they didn't send their army into Tibet until October 1951, after they and Tibetan representatives of the 14th Dalai Lama and 10th Panchen Lama had signed an agreement to liberate Tibet peacefully. The Dalai Lama expressed his support for this 17-point agreement in a telegraphed message to [Chairman Mao](#) on October 24, 1951. Three years later, the Dalai and Panchen Lamas went together to Beijing to attend the first National People's Congress at which the Dalai Lama was elected vice-chairman of the Standing Committee and the Panchen Lama was elected a member of that committee.

After the [People's Liberation Army](#) (PLA) entered Tibet, they took steps to protect the rights of the serfs but didn't, at first, try to reorganize Tibetan society along socialist or democratic lines. Yet, the landlords and ruling monks knew that in time, their land would be redistributed, just as the landlords' property in the rest of China had been confiscated and divided among the peasants. The Tibetan landlords did all they could to frighten the serfs away from associating with the PLA. But, as the serfs increasingly ignored their landlords' wishes and called on the Communists to eliminate the oppressive system of serfdom, some leaders of the "three great monasteries" ([Ganden](#), [Sera](#), and [Drepung](#)) issued a statement, in the latter half of 1956, demanding the feudal system be maintained.

At this point, the PLA decided the time had come to confiscate the landlords' property and redistribute it among the serfs. The landlords and top-level monks retaliated by announcing, in March 1959, the founding of a "Tibet Independent State," and about 7,000 of them assembled in [Lhasa](#) to stage a revolt. Included were more than 170 "[Khampa](#) guerrillas" who had been trained overseas by the O.S.S. and air-dropped into Tibet,

according to a former C.I.A. agent. The O.S.S. also gave them machine guns, mortars, rifles and ammunition. The PLA put down the revolt in Lhasa within two days, capturing some 4,000 rebels. The rebellion had the support of the Dalai Lama, but not of the Panchen Lama. After it failed, the Dalai Lama, along with a group of rebel leaders, fled to India.

The most disruptive event of recent years was the "[cultural revolution](#)," which lasted from 1966 to 1976. It turned most of Tibet's farm and herding areas into giant communes and closed or destroyed many monasteries and temples, just as it did elsewhere in China. At its end, the communes were disbanded and the temples and monasteries were repaired and reopened at government expense.

The idea that most Tibetans are unhappy about what has happened in Tibet and want independence from China is a product manufactured in the West and promoted by the dispossessed landlords who fled to India. Indeed, to believe it is true stretches logic to its breaking point. Who really can believe that a million former serfs - more than 90% of the population - are unhappy about having the shackles of serfdom removed? They now care for their own herds and farmland, marry whomever they wish without first getting their landlord's permission, aren't punished for disrespecting these same landlords, own their own homes, attend school, and have relatively modern hospitals, paved roads, airports and modern industries. An objective measure of this progress is found in the population statistics.

The Tibetan population has doubled since 1950, and the average Tibetan's life span has risen from 36 years at that time to 65 years at present. Of course some Tibetans are unhappy with their lot, but a little investigation soon shows that they are, for the most part, people from families who lost their landlord privileges. There is plenty of evidence that the former serfs tell a quite different story. You will find some Tibetans who hate the [Hans](#) (the majority nationality of China) and some Hans

who hate the Tibetans, a matter of ordinary ethnic prejudice - something any American should be able to understand. But, this doesn't represent a desire for an independent Tibet any more than black/white hostilities in Washington, D.C., Detroit, or Boston represent a desire on the part of most [African-Americans](#) to form a separate nation.

Tibetan Culture Today

The final part of the Tibetan myth has to do with Tibetan culture, which the Dalai Lama's supporters say has been crushed by "the Chinese takeover of Tibet." Culture is an area that requires great care because its treatment is fraught with biases and self-fulfilling judgments. The growth of television in America, for example, is cited either as killing American culture, or enhancing it. Regarding the field of literature, prior to 1950 Tibetans could point with pride to only a few fine epics that had been passed down through the centuries. Now that serfs can become authors, many new writers are producing works of great quality; persons such as the poet Yedam Tsering and the fiction writers Jampel Gyatso, TashiDawa, and Dondru Wangbum. As for art, Tibet for centuries had produced nothing but repetitious religious designs for temples. Now there are many fine Tibetan artists. For example, [Bama Tashi](#)* has been hailed in both France and Canada as a great modern artist, who combines Tibetan religious themes with modern pastoral images. Tibet now has more than 30 professional song and dance ensembles, Tibetan opera groups, and other theatrical troupes where non-existent before 1950.

No, Tibetan culture is not dead; it is flourishing as never before.

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* *Editor's Note:* See this link for other renowned Tibetan artists

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He is also the [author of](#):

- Religion in China Today (1993), New World Press
- [Mount Huashan](#) (), Foreign Languages Press)
- A Sourcebook for Genealogical Research: Resources Alphabetically by Type and Location (2004) , McFarland
- A History of Information Storage and Retrieval (2001),
- Etc.

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This webpage includes responses to the article.

**Professor Bill Willmott [CNZM](#), past president of the Society,
writes:**

"In my opinion, the article provides an excellent summary of Tibetan history by someone who is very familiar with Chinese history generally and has written about Tibetan Buddhism in particular. It neglects negative feelings among Tibetan about Chinese domination of their region, and I think it downplays the bad effects of the Cultural Revolution and the importance of Buddhism and the Dalai Lama to ordinary Tibetans. But the fact that the Tibetan independence movement represents only a small minority of Tibetans (the Dalai Lama himself has renounced independence as his goal) is something most Kiwis don't understand. I recommend it and hope it will incite discussion among our members and beyond".

"Incidentally, I went to primary school with Foster Stockwell in Chengdu and later high school in Ohio and saw him most recently in Beijing in about 1992. His father Olin Stockwell spent two years in prison as a suspected spy just after Liberation and wrote a book about it: *With God in Red China*. An interesting family".

Note that this article does not represent the views of the New Zealand China Friendship Society, which is a non-political organisation that promotes friendship with China and does not take a position on specific issues. We include it on our website as we aim to inform our membership and anyone who is interested in China.