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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Don't Know Much About Tibetan History

By ELLIOT SPERLING

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FOR many Tibetans, the case for the historical independence of their land is unequivocal. They assert that Tibet has always been and by rights now ought to be an independent country. China's assertions are equally unequivocal: Tibet became a part of China during Mongol rule and its status as a part of China has never changed. Both of these assertions are at odds with Tibet's history.

The Tibetan view holds that Tibet was never subject to foreign rule after it emerged in the mid-seventh century as a dynamic power holding sway over an Inner Asian empire. These Tibetans say the appearance of subjugation to the Mongol rulers of the Yuan Dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries, and to the Manchu rulers of China's Qing Dynasty from the 18th century until the 20th century, is due to a modern, largely Western misunderstanding of the personal relations among the Yuan and Qing emperors and the pre-eminent lamas of Tibet. In this view, the lamas simply served as spiritual mentors to the emperors, with no compromise of Tibet's independent status.

In China's view, the Western misunderstandings are about the nature of China: Western critics don't understand that China has a history of thousands of years as a unified multinational state; all of its nationalities are Chinese. The Mongols, who entered China as conquerers, are claimed as Chinese, and their subjugation of Tibet is claimed as a Chinese subjugation.

Here are the facts. The claim that Tibet entertained only personal relations with China at the leadership level is easily rebutted. Administrative records and dynastic histories outline the governing structures of Mongol and Manchu rule. These make it clear that Tibet was subject to rules, laws and decisions made by the Yuan and Qing rulers. Tibet was not independent during these two periods. One of the Tibetan cabinet ministers summoned to Beijing at the end of the 18th century describes himself unambiguously in his memoirs as a subject of the Manchu emperor.

But although Tibet did submit to the Mongol and Manchu Empires, neither attached Tibet to China. The same documentary record that shows Tibetan subjugation to the Mongols and Manchus also shows that China's intervening Ming Dynasty (which ruled from 1368 to 1644) had no control over Tibet. This is problematic, given China's insistence that Chinese sovereignty was exercised in an unbroken line from the 13th century onward.

The idea that Tibet became part of China in the 13th century is a very recent construction. In the early part of the 20th century, Chinese writers generally dated the annexation of Tibet to the 18th century. They described Tibet's status under the Qing with a term that designates a "feudal dependency," not an integral part of a country. And that's because Tibet was ruled as such, within the empires of the Mongols and the Manchus. When the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911, Tibet became independent once more.

From 1912 until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, no Chinese government exercised control over what is today China's Tibet Autonomous Region. The Dalai Lama's government alone ruled the land until 1951.

Marxist China adopted the linguistic sleight of hand that asserts it has always been a unitary multinational country, not the hub of empires. There is now firm insistence that "Han," actually one of several ethnonyms for "Chinese," refers to only one of the Chinese nationalities. This was a conscious decision of those who constructed 20th-century Chinese identity. (It stands in contrast to the Russian decision to use a political term, "Soviet," for the peoples of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.)

There is something less to the arguments of both sides, but the argument on the Chinese side is weaker. Tibet was not

“Chinese” until Mao Zedong’s armies marched in and made it so.

Elliot Sperling is the director of the Tibetan Studies program at Indiana University’s department of Central Eurasia Studies.

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