

# INDEPENDENT TIBET

— SOME FACTS —



The information on this pamphlet has been extensively summarized. For additional material, related documentation, references, photographs, maps, illustrations, audio clips and bibliography check [www.rangzen.net](http://www.rangzen.net), and access the numbered references.



Compiled By: **Jamyang Norbu**

Design & Layout: **Jordhen Chazotsang**

Website: **Ambum Golok**

for the Rangzen Alliance



*The Potala Palace, Lhasa Tibet*

## Functioning State

Before the Chinese Communist invasion of 1950 Tibet was a fully functioning and independent state. It threatened none of its neighbors, fed its population unfailingly, year after year, with no help from the outside world. Tibet owed no money to any country or international institutions, and maintained basic law and order. Tibet banned capital punishment in 1913 (mentioned by a number of foreign travelers<sup>1</sup>) and was one of the first countries in the world to do so. There is no record of it persecuting minorities (e.g. Muslims<sup>2</sup>) or massacring sections of its population from time to time as China and some other countries do – remember Tiananmen. Although its frontiers with India, Nepal and Bhutan were completely unguarded, virtually no Tibetan fled their country as economic or political refugees. There was not a single Tibetan immigrant in the USA or Europe before the Communist invasion.

## Foreign Military Invasion not “Peaceful Liberation”

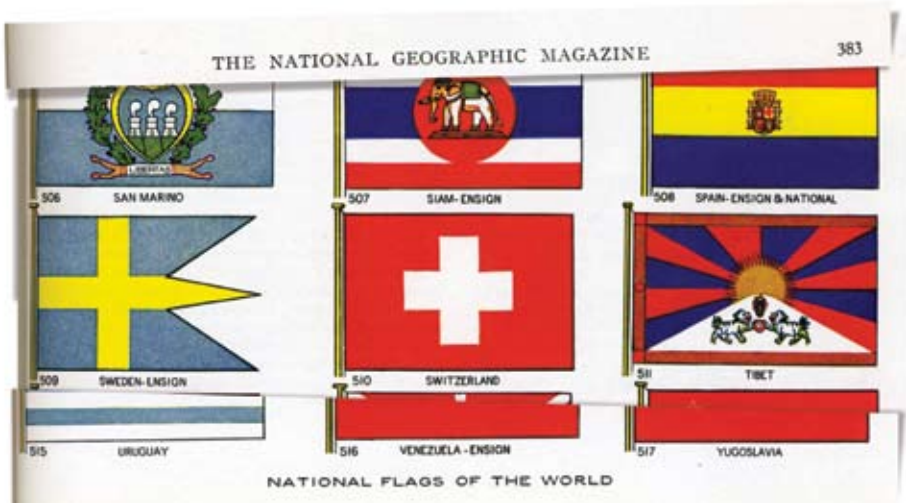
On the dawn of 6th October 1950, the 52nd, 53rd & 54th divisions of the 18th Army<sup>3</sup> of the Red Army (probably over 40,000 troops) attacked the Tibetan frontier guarded by 3,500 regular soldiers and 2,000 Khampa militiamen. Recent research by a Chinese scholar reveals that Mao Zedong met Stalin on 22nd January 1950 and asked for the Soviet air force to transport supplies for the invasion of Tibet. Stalin replied: “It’s good you are preparing to attack Tibet. The Tibetans need to be subdued.”<sup>4</sup>

An English radio operator (employed by the Tibetan government) at the Chamdo front wrote that Tibetan forward defences at the main ferry point on the Drichu River fought almost to the last man.<sup>5</sup> In the south at the river crossing near Markham, the Tibetan advance guards fought heroically but were wiped out, according to an English missionary there.<sup>6</sup> Surviving units conducted fighting retreats westwards, in good order. No unit fled or surrendered. Four days into the retreat, one regiment was overwhelmed and destroyed. Only two weeks after the initial attack, the Tibetan army surrendered. The biography of a Communist official states “Many Tibetans were killed and wounded in the Chamdo campaign.”<sup>7</sup> and “... the Tibetan soldiers fought bravely, but they were no match for the superior numbers and better training” of the Chinese forces. According to the only Western military expert who wrote on the Chinese invasion of Tibet “...the Reds suffered at least 10,000 casualties.”<sup>8</sup>

It was not a peaceful liberation of Tibet as Beijing claims. In 1956 the Great Khampa revolt started and spread throughout the country culminating in the March Uprising of 1959. Guerilla operations only ceased in 1974. “A conservative estimate would have to be no less than half-a-million”<sup>9</sup> Tibetans killed in the fighting. Many more died in the subsequent political campaigns, forced labor camps (laogai) and the great famine. The revolutionary uprisings throughout Tibet in 2008 and the brutal Chinese crackdown clearly demonstrate that the struggle continues today.

## National Flag

The modern Tibetan national flag was adopted in 1916.<sup>10</sup> Its first appearance before the world was in *National Geographic Magazine*'s “Flags of the World” issue of 1934<sup>11</sup> and other publications, and was reproduced in the early thirties in cigarette card collections in Europe.<sup>12</sup> The flag was probably too new and unknown to appear in the very first flag issue (1917) of the *National Geographic*, but Tibet did receive mention in an article on medieval flags in that same issue.<sup>13</sup> According to an eminent vexillologist, Professor Lux-Worm, the national flag of Tibet was based on an older 7th century snow lion standard of the Tibetan Emperor, Songtsen Gampo.<sup>14</sup> It should be borne in mind that over 90% of the flags of the nations in the UNO were created after WWII, including the present national flag of China.



## National Anthem

The old Tibetan national anthem or national hymn, Gangri Rawae or “Snow Mountain Rampart” was composed in 1745 by the (secular) Tibetan ruler Pholanas.<sup>15</sup> It was recited at the end of official ceremonies and sung at the beginning of opera performances in Lhasa.<sup>16</sup> When the Tibetan government came into exile in India, a more modern national anthem, Sishe Pende (“Joy and Benefits”)<sup>17</sup> was composed. The lyrics were written by Dalai Lama’s tutor, Trichang Rimpoche who was considered a great poet in the classical *nyengak* (Skt. *kaviya*) tradition.

# Maps of Tibet



Detail from 1827 map of Asia.

Many pre-1950 maps, globes and atlases showed Tibet as an independent nation separate from China. Some of the earliest maps on record of Asia show Tibet (variably spelled as Tobbat, Thibbet, or the Kingdom of Barantola) as separate from China or Cathay. A map of Asia drawn by the Dutch cartographer, Pieter van der Aa around 1680 shows Tibet in two parts but distinct from China;<sup>18</sup> as does a 1700 map drawn by the French cartographer Guillaume de L'isle, where Tibet is referred to as “Kingdom of Grand Tibet.”<sup>19</sup> A map of India, China and Tibet published in the USA in 1877 clearly represents Tibet as distinct from the two other nations.<sup>20</sup> An 1827 map of Asia drawn by Anthony Finley of Philadelphia, clearly show “Great Tibet” as distinct from the Chinese Empire.<sup>21</sup>

Probably the largest stained glass globe in the world (in Boston), based on the Rand McNally 1934 map of the world, clearly shows Tibet as a separate nation.<sup>22</sup>

Following the publication of the great atlas commissioned by the Manchu Emperor Kangxi and created by Jesuit cartographers, some European maps in the mid-1700s began to depict Tibet as part of China. The Jesuits could not personally survey Tibet (as they had surveyed China and Manchuria) since Tibet was not part of the Chinese Empire. So they trained two Mongol monks in Beijing and sent them to make a secret survey of Tibet. Similar clandestine surveys of Tibet were conducted by British mapmakers using trained Himalayan natives and even a Mongol monk. An American sinologist has observed that, like European colonial powers, China could be said to have used cartography to further its “Colonial Enterprise” in Tibet and Korea.<sup>23</sup>

# Tibetan Currency

Before the Chinese invasion, Tibet had its own currency based on the Tam and Srang denomination system. The earliest coinage used in Tibet was silver and struck in



Tibetan coins



Tibetan currency notes



Nepal under a treaty agreement.<sup>24</sup> A joint Chinese-Tibetan currency (the Ganden Tanka) was issued when Manchu forces occupied Tibet. After the Chinese army was expelled in 1912, Tibet minted its own coin using Buddhist and Tibetan designs. Paper currency was only introduced into Tibet in the early 20th century, but according to the numismatist Wolfgang Bertsch, they were “small works of art.”<sup>25</sup> A unique aspect of Tibetan banknotes was that the serial numbers were handwritten by a guild of specialist calligraphists, the *epa*, to prevent forgery.

Even after the Communist invasion, Tibetans successfully undermined Chinese efforts to take over its currency. Official Chinese currency only came into use after the departure of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government from Tibet in March 1959.<sup>26</sup>

## Tibetan Passports

The Tibetan government issued its own passports to travelers entering its borders or (the few) Tibetans who traveled abroad. Before WWII, the term passports covered visas and travel documents in general. The earliest record of a Tibetan passport

issued to a foreign traveler is in 1688 to an Armenian merchant, Johannes.<sup>27</sup>

The Tibetan government gave its approval for the first-ever Everest expedition (1921). Charles Bell, the visiting British diplomat in Lhasa wrote “I received from the Tibetan Government a passport in official form, which granted permission for the climbing of Mount Everest.”<sup>28</sup> The subsequent Everest expeditions of 1922, 1924 and 1936<sup>29</sup> also received passports from the Tibetan government. Passports were sometimes issued for scientific undertakings: the Schaeffer expedition of 1939,<sup>30</sup> Tucci’s expedition of 1949<sup>31</sup> and the plant hunter Frank Kingdon Ward in 1924.<sup>32</sup>

President Roosevelt’s two envoys to Tibet in 1942 were presented their passports at Yatung.<sup>33</sup> The Americans Lowell Thomas Jr. and Sr. visited Tibet in 1949, and were issued “Tibetan passports” at Dhomo. “When the Dalai Lama’s passport was spread out before us, I could not help thinking that many Western explorers who had failed to reach Lhasa would have highly prized a document like this.”<sup>34</sup>



Passport of Tsepon Shakabpa, 1948.

The first modern Tibetan passport<sup>35</sup> with personal information, photograph and space for visas and endorsements was issued in 1948 to members of the Tibetan trade mission. It was modeled on the international one-page fold-out model of 1915. Britain, USA and seven other countries issued visas and transit visas for this document.

## Treaties

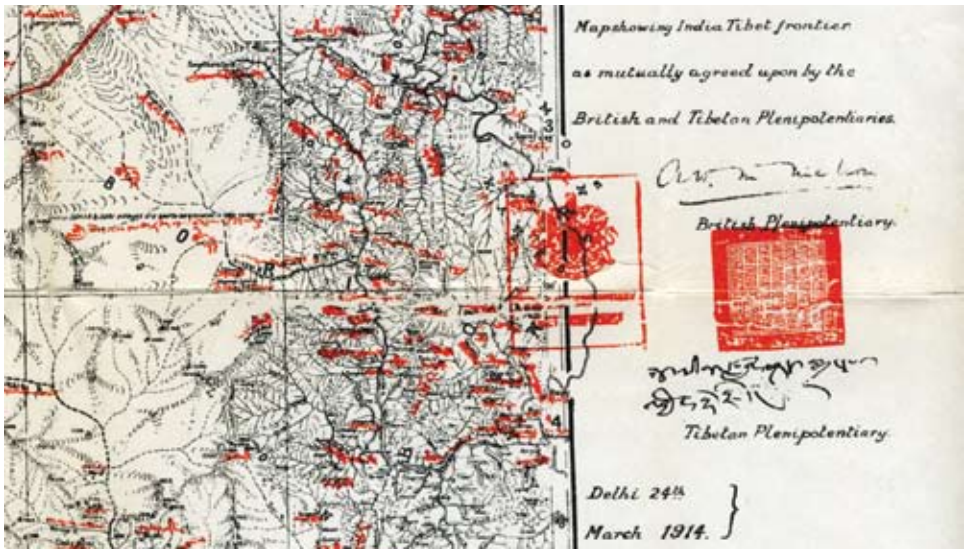


*Tibetan - China Treaty Pillar (821 AD) within protective enclosure.*

One of the most important treaties between the Tibetan Empire and the Chinese Empire dates back to AD 821-822. The text, carved in Tibetan and Chinese on a stone pillar<sup>36</sup> near the Jokhang temple in Lhasa states that “Great Tibet” and “Great China” would act towards each other with respect, friendship and equality.

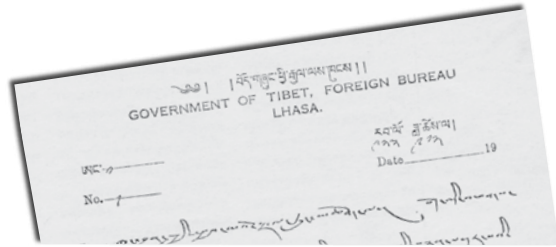
As an independent nation, Tibet entered into treaties with neighboring states: Bushair 1681, Ladakh 1683 and 1842, Nepal 1856 and so on. Tibet signed a number of treaties and conventions with Britain culminating in the Simla Treaty of 1914 by which British India and Tibet reached an agreement on their common frontier.<sup>37</sup> India’s present-day claims to the demarcation of its northern border is based on this treaty which was signed by Tibet – not China.

In January 1913, Tibet and Mongolia signed a treaty in Urga, the preamble of which reads: “Whereas Mongolia and Tibet having freed themselves from the Manchu dynasty and separated themselves from China, have become independent states, and whereas the two States have always professed one and the same religion, and to the end that their ancient mutual friendships may be strengthened...”<sup>38</sup> Declarations of friendship, mutual aid, Buddhist fraternity, and mutual trade etc. follow in the various articles. The Tibetan word rangzen is used throughout to mean “independence”. (See top strip on front cover.)



The McMahon line map with signatures and seals of Tibetan and British plenipotentiaries, Delhi, March 24, 1914.

A Tibetan Bureau of Foreign Affairs was established in 1942, which conducted diplomatic relations (and correspondence<sup>39</sup>) with Britain, USA, Nepal, independent India and China.



Tibetan foreign bureau letter to Mao Tsetung.

## Post & Telegraph System

The modern Tibetan postal system was built on the older messenger system of the early Tibetan Empire and the later Mongol courier system. A Post and Telegraph Office (*dak-tar laykhung*) was created in 1920.<sup>40</sup> Postage stamps of various denominations were indigenously designed and hand-printed, and they are now collector's items.<sup>41</sup> Though not a signatory to the International Postal Treaty, a system was created so that letters from Tibet could be delivered to foreign addresses, and letters from abroad be



Tibetan postage stamps and cover.

delivered inside Tibet. Spencer Chapman, visiting Lhasa in 1936, declared that “the postal and telegraph system is most efficient.”<sup>42</sup> The Czech filmmaker Vladimir Cis had a letter from his family in Prague delivered to him in the wilderness of Tibet by a postal runner.<sup>43</sup>

A telegraph line from India to Lhasa was completed in 1923, along with a basic telephone service.<sup>44</sup> Both were open for public use. The Tibetan capital was electrified in 1927. The work of installing both the hydroelectric plant and the distribution system was undertaken near “single-handedly”<sup>45</sup> by a young Tibetan engineer, Ringang. All these projects were initiated and paid for by the Tibetan government. Radio Lhasa was launched in 1948 and broadcasted news in Tibetan, English and Chinese.<sup>46</sup>

## Witnesses to Independent Tibet

The fact that Tibet was a peaceful, independent country is attested to by the writings of many impartial western observers<sup>47</sup> who not only visited pre-invasion Tibet, but even lived there for considerable periods of time – as the titles of some of their memoirs seem to proudly proclaim: *Twenty Years in Tibet* (David McDonald)<sup>48</sup>, *Eight Years in Tibet* (Peter Aufschnieter)<sup>49</sup>, *Seven Years in Tibet* (Heinrich Harrer)<sup>50</sup>. The premier scholar on Tibet, Hugh Richardson lived for a total of eight years in Tibet, and his many writings<sup>51</sup> reveal a country that was functioning, orderly, peaceful and with a long history of political independence and cultural achievement. Another great scholar and diplomat, Charles Bell, regarded as the “architect of Britain’s Tibet policy,” was convinced that Britain and America’s refusal to recognize Tibetan independence (but which they sometimes tacitly acknowledged when it was to their advantage) was largely dictated by their desire “to increase their commercial profits in China.”<sup>52</sup>

It is almost certain that none of the official propagandists who demonize Tibet in Chinese publications had witnessed life in old Tibet. In fact, none of Beijing’s Tibet propagandists in the West (Michael Parenti, Tom Grunfeld, Barry Sautman *et al*)<sup>53</sup> had visited Tibet before 1980. They often misrepresent old Tibetan society and government with select quotes from English journalists and officials (L. A. Waddell, Percival Landon, Edmund Candler, Captain W.F.T. O’Connor) who accompanied the British invasion force of 1904, and who sought to justify that violent imperialist venture into Tibet by demonizing Tibetan society and institutions.

The only Chinese official with scholarly credentials who spent any length of time in old Tibet was Dr. Shen Tsung-lien, representative of the Republic of China in Lhasa (1944-1949). In his book *Tibet and the Tibetans*, Dr. Shen writes of a nation clearly distinct from China, and one that “...had enjoyed full independence since 1911.” He writes truthfully of a hierarchical, conservative society “fossilized many centuries back” but whose people were orderly, peaceable and hospitable – but also “notorious litigants,” adding that “few peoples in the world are such eloquent pleaders.” Shen also mentions “Appeals may be addressed to any office to which the disputants belong, or even to the Dalai Lama or his regent.”<sup>54</sup>