



## China is a 20th century idea

*March 28, 2007*

*The nation of China evolved as an idea not more than 100 years ago.*

*Then how could Tibet have always existed as a part of China?*

A conversation with the Dalai Lama in the 1980s has remained in my memory. The conversation included the future of Tibet and China. The Dalai Lama told me, "The changes will come from inside China. In fact, we, Tibetans have nothing to do except to keep our faith and culture intact. But watch, changes will happen inside China".

Twenty years later, I am not sure if the Tibetan leader has kept the same view, but some recent news has made me believe that things are changing in China.

First, a leading Chinese historian has recently taken a different stand than the usual official line on China's historical sovereignty over Tibet. Professor Ge Jianxiong, director of the Institute of Chinese Historical Geography at Fudan University in Shanghai, stated in an article in *China Review*: "It would be a defiance of history to claim that Tibet has always been a part of China since the Tang Dynasty (7th to 10th century)."

Prof Ge noted: "At least [Tibet] was not administered by the Tang Dynasty." His point is that otherwise, "there would have been no need for the Tang emperor of the day to offer Princess Wen Cheng in a 'marriage of state' to the Tibetan king, Songtsen Gampo." According to

him, Tibet's takeover during the Qing (Manchu) Dynasty (17th to early 20th century) was the starting point for Chinese 'sovereignty' over the Himalayan region.

Ge's interpretation is different from the official Communist Party line. Ge pointed out that before the foundation of the Republic of China in 1912, the idea of China (Chinese, Zhongguo) wasn't clearly conceptualised. Even during the late Manchu dynasty, the term 'China' would on occasion be used to refer to the "Qin State, including all the territory that fell within the boundaries of the Qing empire; though at times, it would refer only to the '18 interior provinces'. Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang were not included."

Prof Ge goes a step further: "If China really wishes to rise peacefully and be on a solid footing to face the future, we must understand the sum of our history and learn from our experiences."

There are changes occurring in the Middle Kingdom. They include a series of three letters written to the Chinese President by Phuntso Wangye, a veteran Tibetan Party leader. Wangye was the first Tibetan Communist in the forties and in September 1951, he led the Chinese troops into Lhasa. Analysts believe that the letters may signal a debate in the Communist hierarchy on a possible return of the Dalai Lama and could unblock the current negotiations between representatives of the Tibetan leader and Beijing.

In one of his letters written in 2006, Phuntso Wangye (Phunwang for the Tibetans) pointed his finger at Yin Fatang, a former party boss in Tibet. He told the Chinese President that the Dalai Lama had declared that he just wanted greater autonomy, not independence: "But Chinese and Tibetan Leftists, or conservatives, are convinced otherwise and regularly denounce him for trying to split Tibet from the Chinese 'motherland'."

Yin Fatang, first secretary of the Communist Party in Tibet from 1980 to 1985, is a hardliner associated with the demolition of a monastery in Sichuan Province in 2001. The Serthar Buddhist Institute, founded in Kardze in the 1980s, had soon become the largest religious concentration on the Tibetan plateau with some 7,000 monks and nuns. Probably because of the fact that thousands of Chinese, who had joined the Institute, demonstrating the increased interest in Tibetan Buddhist teachings, the Institute was closed in 2001 and most of its buildings razed.

Yin Fatang has another distinction. In the 1980s, he initiated the railway line to Lhasa by bringing the matter to the knowledge Deng Xiaoping. Mr Yin later recalled: "Before I mentioned the railway, Xiaoping talked about it himself since he paid much attention to the railway. He said that we must start the project soon."

According to Yin, Deng was keen on the project: "Deng Xiaoping's words showed his dedication and desire for the railway. He stated, "The plateau cannot wait any longer and China cannot wait any longer." For the integrity of Tibetan culture and India's security, it is undoubtedly the most dangerous project of the century.

To come back to Phunwang's letter, he told Hu that Beijing was mistaken in believing that the Tibetan issue would be solved with the death of the present Dalai Lama: "Any notion of delaying the problem until after the 14th Dalai Lama dies a natural death is not only naïve, but also tactically wrong."

On the contrary, Phunwang warned the Chinese leadership that the Tibetan leader's demise would only radicalise young Tibetan hardliners frustrated with his 'middle way'. He reminded the Chinese President about his objective to establish a harmonious society. If he strived for the return of hundreds of thousands of exiled Tibetans, he could turn

'confrontation into harmony'. Phunwang concluded: "wrong Leftist policies continue... in Tibet... It should cease."

First Tibetan Communist, Phunwang's dream to see a modern and socialist Tibet in his lifetime seemed to be coming true when one day in April 1958, he was unexpectedly arrested and told that he needed to 'cleanse his thinking'. During the following 18 years, he was interrogated, tortured and jailed in the most atrocious conditions. He was finally rehabilitated at the end of the seventies when Deng Xiaoping decided to see 'the truth through the facts'.

Ge's article and Phunwang's letter are important at a time when the leadership of China is not yet settled and rumours speak of a possible tussle between Hu Jintao and Vice President Zeng Qinghong for the post of President during the Communist Party's 17th Congress to be held this fall.

Another big change in China is highlighted in a recent poll by East China Normal University which estimates that 31.4 percent of Chinese above 16 years old have religious leanings, which means roughly 400 million believers.

Continue watching. Things are changing in China!