



Dalai Lama, China and the West: Is win-win-win still possible? by Da Wei

[Editor's note: Much has been written about the Tibetan riots and their aftermath, mostly from a Western perspective. This PacNet provides a Chinese perspective in the interest of presenting all sides of a difficult emotional issue. As always, opinions expressed in PacNet are those of the author and not the Pacific Forum CSIS.]

No one anticipated the dynamics triggered by the riots in Tibet March 14. The focus of attention has shifted from the rioters vs. armed police on the streets of Lhasa, to activists vs. Olympic torch bearers in London, Paris, and San Francisco and finally to average Chinese vs. those who, from a Chinese perspective, "hurt the feelings of the Chinese people." Fairly or not, the list of "bad guys" (from a Chinese perspective) includes "the Dalai clique," CNN and Carrefour, a French supermarket chain, among others.

New wave of Chinese nationalism

This is at least the fourth outbreak of Chinese patriotism or nationalism in the last decade: previous triggers include the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia in 1999, the EP-3 incident in 2001, and protests against the Japanese prime minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine in 2005.

The latest wave of nationalism has new characteristics. First, from a Chinese perspective, it was not triggered by an isolated incident like the EP-3 case. Tibetan organizations in exile prepared carefully to use the Beijing Olympics to draw international attention; Western human rights activists began politicizing the Olympics with issues like Darfur a couple of years ago. Second, it is not a conflict with a single country. Chinese feel that they face a choir of the entire West. Third, the "chorus" is not made up of just Western governments, but includes the media and civil society.

All this has made many Chinese feel that they face, for the first time in many years, Western ideology. Thus, this situation has greater implications than previous waves of nationalism. This confrontation should not be oversimplified as mere right vs. wrong, as occurred during the U.S.-Soviet ideological conflict in the Cold War. Rather, it is about the pride of China and the prejudice of the West.

In response, younger Chinese mobilized on the internet with an unprecedented speed and scale. And for the first time in 10 years, overseas Chinese played a major role. Overseas Chinese held demonstrations and rallies to support China in Paris, London, L.A., and other cities. Their speed was dramatic. On April 16, in one day, more than 2 million Chinese MSN messenger users (mainly young white-collar professionals in major cities) adopted a red heart with the word "China" (which means "love China") as their MSN

signature. This "hearting China" movement was organized by netizens and soon spread nation-wide.

Short term: A lose-lose-lose situation

As the sound and fury have diminished, we can examine the gains and losses of the Dalai Lama, China, and Western countries.

Obviously, the Dalai Lama and his supporters have successfully drawn international attention to the Tibet issue. But winning international attention is not the only way to get a solution in their favor. A permanent solution of the Tibet issue that satisfies all concerned parties can only be achieved with the support of ordinary Chinese. However, the riots and the agitation around the Olympic torch relay pushed the Dalai Lama, his government-in-exile, and organizations like the Tibetan Youth Congress, away from the majority of Chinese.

For human rights activists and sympathizers of the Dalai Lama in Western countries, their actions can be called a failure. The controversy surrounding the Olympic torch relay changed the focus from the Tibet issue to the cleavage of ideologies. Their only achievement was humiliating the Chinese government. At the same time, they disappointed the majority of Chinese because extinguishing the Olympic torch, which embodies the hopes and goodwill of the Chinese people, humiliated and offended ordinary Chinese.

It is a big loss for Beijing. The Chinese government did not expect the Olympic Games to be politicized to this extent. It also damaged severely the image of China's "peaceful development" and its "harmonious society."

Tibet and nation building in China

The key to understanding the common Chinese response to these dynamics is to view the Tibet issue from the lens of China's nation-building process.

Ancient East Asia was basically a "small world" defined by Chinese as "Tian Xia" or "All Under Heaven." Different political and ethnic authorities interact with each other in the sphere of "Tian Xia": it is oversimplified to use modern European concepts of the nation state and international relations to describe relations among those authorities.

This system began its transformation into a Westphalian style nation-state when the Qing Dynasty was defeated by the Europeans in the mid-19th century. Intellectuals and revolutionaries redefined the word "Zhong Guo" and used it as the name of the new nation state. Similarly reconceptualized was the "Chinese nation" (Zhong Hua Min Zu), by which Dr. Sun Yat-sen referred to all major ethnic groups in China. All these creations were based on the political and territorial facts of the late 19th century when Tibet was a part of the community that later developed into modern China.

The importance of the Tibet issue reflects Tibet's role in the concept of China as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation state. This nation-building process is the product of the collective efforts of Chinese – including Tibetan Chinese – for generations. Thus, the Tibet issue is a litmus test and proving ground for the nation state of China.

Could crisis become opportunity?

There are reasons for hope, however. The Dalai Lama, the Chinese government, and the West can have win-win-win interactions when all sides think and act under a shared acknowledgement that China is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and integrated nation state.

The founding theory of both Sun Yat-sen's Republic of China and the current People's Republic of China goes beyond "one ethnic group, one state" thinking. The PRC has gone further by establishing three levels of autonomous regions and practicing the policies of "ethnic regional autonomy." Obviously, a lot remains to be done, however.

On the one hand, the Chinese government needs more efficient governance on the local level. This policy could include protecting and expanding human rights, and adopting new affirmative action in areas like employment that are designed to adjust to the developing market economy in Tibet.

The Chinese government also needs to strengthen the status of Tibetan and other ethnic minorities in the official political discourse of the country. For example, research and education into ethnic history are needed. Quite simply, if Tibetans feel proud to be part of China, the independence movement will lose its bedrock.

As for the Olympics, ordinary Chinese need to better understand that Americans and Europeans are not out to deliberately hurt them. When different cultures meet and people do not have a deep understanding of the other, conflict is inevitable. The urgent task for Chinese intellectuals and the younger generation is to find and elaborate an ideology that fits China. In particular, they have to identify convergent and divergent values between the ideology of China and that of the West. What kind of ideas can China contribute to the world?

If the Dalai Lama is genuine when he said he does not seek Tibet independence, he and people around him ought to realize that requests for a "greater Tibet" or "peaceful zone" are neither workable nor helpful for building a multi-ethnic nation state. These requests will have but one effect: making other Chinese feel that they are a springboard for future independence. If the Dalai Lama really cares about Tibet's religious and cultural heritage, he could talk more about those policies rather than China's administration and jurisdiction. If he genuinely thinks that Tibet is part of China, then it would be better for him to leave historical issues to historians and stop arguing that Tibet was not part of China in the past.

Americans and Europeans should not be scared of Chinese nationalist sentiment. Nationalism is not a negative value. All nation states including the U.S. and European countries were founded by nationalist movements. Of course, it would be better if Western countries had a more profound and sophisticated understanding of China; but it will be helpful for Western observers to keep the following three points in mind:

- Was Tibet part of China? There is no easy answer to this question since there was no nation state as we call "China" in history. People with different suppositions can find evidence to support their views. But it is undeniable that Tibet has close historical links with other parts of China. So, to argue that Tibet was not part of China is not only against all Western (and not just Western) government positions, but also lacks intellectual depth.
- There is a human rights problem in Tibet, as in other areas in China and other parts of the world. But the human rights problem in Tibet is mainly a problem of governance, not that of ethnicity or culture. Neither Communism nor any other ideology has anything to do with that.
- The concept of China covers the whole of China; the concept of Chinese covers all ethnic groups in China. So, please stop using the dichotomy of Tibet vs. China and Tibetan vs. Chinese. Tibetan Chinese are Chinese just as African Americans are Americans.

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