

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Capstones

Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism

---

Fall 12-15-2017

### Is the Free Tibet movement a lost cause?

Tsering D. Gurung

*Cuny Graduate School of Journalism*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj\\_etds/236](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gj_etds/236)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

Is the Free Tibet movement a lost cause?

*China's growing economic influence, internecine rivalries, and over-reliance on the West have hurt the decades-old movement*

In mid-October, on the day before the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China opened in Beijing, some 60 Tibetans gathered in front of the steel-gray facade of the Chinese Consulate in Midtown Manhattan. Waving the blue-and-yellow striped flag of Tibet, which is banned in China, they chanted for Tibet to be freed from nearly 70 years of Chinese rule.

"We are here to voice our opinions, to express our concerns, not that they are going to listen, but we have to keep trying," said Sonam Wangdu, 75, a leading activist.

Tibetans have been mounting such protests around the world since China first occupied Tibet in 1950. After a failed uprising in 1959, the Dalai Lama, leader of the Tibetan people, fled to India, where he has been based since. Tens of thousands of Tibetans followed him into exile, slowly spreading around the world and starting a movement that gradually soared to global prominence.

In the 1990s, Tibet was a cause célèbre. Actor Richard Gere used the 1993 Academy Awards stage to call attention to the human rights situation in Tibet and asked Deng Xiaoping, then China's leader, to "take his troops and take the Chinese away from Tibet and allow these people to live as free, independent people again."

In 1996, the first Free Tibet concert in San Francisco featured Radiohead, Bjork, Rage Against the Machine and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. In 1997 Hollywood released two films about Tibet: Martin Scorsese's "Kundun" and Jean-Jacques Annaud's "Seven Years in Tibet," which earned over \$131 million at the box office.

While the Tibetan movement enjoyed significant support from Western nations and wide media coverage in its early years, it has now languished after decades of failed diplomatic talks with the Chinese government.

The two sides last met for talks in 2010, when the Dalai Lama's special envoys presented a note on the Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for Tibet. The meeting left the issue unresolved. Although Tibetan officials have regularly said they are interested in resuming talks, the Chinese have shown no interest.

China's tightening of its grip on Tibet and unwillingness to engage in dialogue with exiled Tibetan leaders may be viewed as a direct result of its meteoric economic growth. Since China opened up its economy in 1990, its GDP has consistently grown and is projected to overtake the United States' next year.

European and American leaders who once chastised China over its treatment of Tibet are now cowed by the tremendous business opportunities available to their major companies. And as world leaders seek better economic relations with China, the cause of human rights in China and, with it, freedom for the people of Tibet have been dealt a blow. The United States, which has often spoken up for the Tibet issue, is also China's largest trading partner.

An image of the Dalai Lama exiting the White House through a back door – and passing by a mound of trash – after a private meeting with President Obama in 2010 spoke volumes.

China, which views the Dalai Lama as a separatist figure, has repeatedly expressed its discontent with foreign leaders who meet with the Nobel Peace Prize winner. Countries that have defied its threats in the past have faced the consequences of offending a growing economic power.

Beijing canceled the China-EU summit scheduled to take place in Lyon in 2008 after Nicolas Sarkozy, then president of France and of the European Union, announced his plans to meet with the Dalai Lama.

"We know that China is extremely sensitive when it comes to Tibet and relations with the Dalai Lama," José Manuel Barroso, the E.U. head, told the French media at the time. "But frankly there was no reason for this decision. He has the right to meet whoever he wants."

Not every nation can afford to take such a stance. When China called off meetings with Mongolia after it welcomed the Dalai Lama for a four-day visit last year, senior Mongolian officials were forced to apologize and announced they wouldn't extend any further invitations. The Buddhist-majority nation, which has been undergoing financial troubles, was seeking a major loan from Beijing.

The likelihood of the Chinese leaders' travelling to a country is 13.6 percent less if that country's government receives the Dalai Lama in a given year, according to research by Andreas Fuchs of Heidelberg University in Germany.

Fuchs's research also found that a meeting between a head of state and the Dalai Lama led to a drop in exports to China by 16.9 percent on average. For instance, Italy's

export values showed a dip in the years that the Dalai Lama met with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (1994) and Massimo D'Alema (1999).

“The reality of the situation is, everybody is concerned with their national interests and all politicians are concerned with short-term gains that undermine long-term interests of the states,” Penpa Tsering, former Representative of the Dalai Lama to North America, said in a phone interview. “But when you bow down to Chinese interests, you are also bowing down your sovereignty.”

Tsering’s words would mean little to nations that have benefited immensely from deals with Beijing.

The \$5 trillion One Belt, One Road – a mega-infrastructure project, which seeks to rebuild the Old Silk Road and connect over 60 countries across Asia, Europe and Africa – promises deals to investors and businesses around the world

Already companies including General Motors, DHL and Deutsche Bank have benefited from One Belt One Road projects. According to an Economist report, “General Electric (GE) made sales of \$2.3 billion in equipment orders from OBOR projects in 2016, almost three times the total for the previous year.”

Like his predecessors, Xi, who was re-elected party chief in October, has maintained a harsh stance against the Tibetan movement. Even before his election, he said he would “smash” any separatist movement that aimed to “threaten national unity.” Tibetan activists say the situation inside Tibet has worsened under Xi, citing increased surveillance, censorship and crackdown on human rights.

“There’s no political dissent inside Tibet,” said Pema Yoko of Students for Free Tibet. “Tibetans don’t even have the freedom to celebrate His Holiness’ birthday.”

Instances of Tibetans getting detained and sentenced to prison for simply going on a picnic on the Dalai Lama’s birthday are not uncommon, she noted.

Tibet has repeatedly been ranked amongst the least free states in the world by Freedom House, a Washington-based watchdog organization. In its 2017 report on Tibet, it notes the Chinese government continues to carry out the “draconian public surveillance” that began after the 2008 protests.

More than 600 Tibetans have been detained since 2008, according to the International Campaign for Tibet which maintains a list of political prisoners inside Tibet. And at least 150 Tibetans have set themselves on fire, according to the same organization. More

than half of those protests occurred in 2012, the year Xi was elected general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party.

“Xi is basically someone who is trying to replicate what Mao did in his era,” said Urgen Badheysang, campaign director at the New York-based Students for Free Tibet. “It’s not looking good at all. Internet freedom, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, they’re all at an all-time low.’

The Tibetan independence movement began in 1959 when hundreds of thousands of Tibetans took to the streets of Lhasa, Tibet’s capital, demanding independence and an end to Chinese repression. The demonstration was quickly quashed, led to the Dalai Lama’s flight and China’s complete takeover of Tibet. Since then there have been similar uprisings, notably, in 1987 and in 2008.

A pivotal shift for the movement came in 1988, when in an address to the European Parliament the Dalai Lama proposed the Middle Way Policy, which seeks autonomy for Tibet. Known as the Strasbourg Proposal, it marked a departure from earlier calls for complete independence and called on China to engage in “earnest negotiations” with Tibetan representatives.

The Dalai Lama’s endorsement of nonviolent struggle and willingness to compromise with the Chinese earned him the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, which subsequently placed the Tibet issue on the international agenda. The Tibet issue started to be discussed in Western parliaments, and countries – including the United States, which had been wary of taking in Tibetans as “refugees” – began accepting them. Under a special provision for Tibetans in the 1990 Immigration Act, the first 1,000 Tibetans were resettled in the United States.

But this also caused a friction within the Tibetan community; dividing the Tibetan people into those who support *Umay-Lam*, the Middle Way Approach, and those who stood by their demand for *Rangzen* or independence.

“In any kind of struggle, there would be different positions and so is the case with Tibet,” said Penpa Tsering. “You have a group of Tibetans who are seeking independence and they are entitled to it.”

Tibetan activists who advocate for independence argue gaining autonomy does not guarantee freedom from China.

“If you have independence, you’re in charge of your country,” said Sonam Wangdu. “This is not to say that our country is going to be perfect even as an independent country but I think we have a chance to do things our way.” With the Middle Way Approach, he added, “the policies will be decided by China in Beijing.”

Experts say the Tibetan movement has also been hurt by lack of vision among its leaders and their failure to move beyond street demonstrations.

“Because the Tibetan exiles were so successful with the human rights approach and their media approach and the Western sympathy approach in the public and so on, they developed the idea that this is what successful politics look like,” said Robert Barnett, director of Columbia University’s Modern Tibetan Studies program. “It looks like being in the news and so on.”

While the focus on human rights issues was hugely successful in generating awareness about Tibet, Barnett noted, Tibetan activists’ continued reliance on this approach is one reason the movement hasn’t achieved real political gains.

“Tibetan leaders and activists have been quite effective at generating a certain kind of soft power, but that is of very limited value if they aren’t also engaging with the fundamentals of hard power and the people who handle it,” said Barnett.

Even during the movement’s golden years, Western support of Tibet never transcended into change in national policies or shifts in international relations. There was never any significant cost to China for noncompliance, nor a resolution of the situation of Tibetans in Tibet.

This is something that Tibetan activists seem to ignore. They view, for instance, a courtesy invitation by Canada and United States for the Dalai Lama to speak at a human rights session in Geneva, accompanied by a joint condemnation of China’s human rights situation by a group of countries, as a huge boost to the movement.

“Both of these were unprecedented, both of these had never happened,” said Pema Yoko. “So this is a strong message to China that they care about Tibet and also that change is happening.”

Ordinary Tibetans are more skeptical.

Dechen Dolma, 29, was born in Kathmandu, Nepal and now lives in New York City. She does not believe the movement will generate any real success and has stopped participating in demonstrations altogether.

“How can we achieve freedom from China by organizing three to four rallies a year,” said Dolma. “It’s time for us to get realistic.”

As time passes and more Tibetans get resettled in the West, there is also the question of just how long the diaspora will be able to maintain its unique Tibetan identity and

connection to its land. Over 30,000 Tibetans now live in North America, according to the Office of Tibet in Washington, DC.

That fewer than 100 Tibetans showed up at the October protest outside the Chinese Consulate – which was organized by two prominent organizations, Students for Free Tibet and Tibetan Youth Congress –also shows just how disenchanting Tibetans themselves have grown with the independence movement, now in its seventh decade.

“I think our job is to really convince supporters and Tibetan community that this is worth investing their time in,” said Urgen Badheysang. “If they see the value and if we are able to present it properly, then people will turn up.”

Badheysang, who was born in Nepal, grew up hearing from his father about how he was shot in the leg by the Chinese Police after he participated in a street demonstration in Lhasa, the Tibetan capital, in 1987.

His father, he said, would show him the bullet mark on his thigh and remark this happened because he was inside Tibet.

“It truly kind of solidified the reality on the ground inside Tibet for me,” said Badheysang.

It is this story that he said he likes to tell people to educate them about the situation in Tibet.

Unfortunately, not many seem to be listening.