



INSTITUTE OF
CHINESE STUDIES
DELHI

SPECIAL LECTURE

What China pre-1949 Official/Authoritative documents say about Beijing's claim of sovereignty over Tibet?

Chair: Patricia Uberoi

Speaker: Hon-Shiang Lau

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Venue: ICS, Seminar Room

Prof. Lau questions the assertion by the PRC that Tibet has been part of China “since ‘antiquity’”. He examined only the official sources approved by the PRC, and premised his talk to engage the following propositions. Firstly, the PRC’s justification to refuse negotiation with Tibetans. Secondly, Dalai Lama’s refusal to admit that Tibet has been part of China’s since antiquity and finally, PRC’s claims that Tibet is being unified and not invaded or occupied.

He began his talk with an example of a propaganda statement issued by Chinese nation on the issue of Tibet. The Vice President of United Front of China during the National Press Conference of 2008 said, “The fundamental political bases in recognizing Tibet has been acceptable as part of Chinese since antiquity. The Dalai Lama has consistently refused to educate himself on such a serious and fundamental issue.” China continues its accusations over Tibet since 2002.

The speaker has based his research from the period of the Ming dynasty and has used “Chinese chauvinistic approach”- a method that only takes into account the official line of the PRC and discounts the view of other actors. He applied this approach by making use of only Chinese documents before 1949. Such a methodology was adopted to make the finding convincing to his compatriots. The speaker looked at the different administrative aspects employed by the ruling regimes like census, taxation etc. to ascertain if Tibet was part of China during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Having used Chinese official historical documents for research, he also examines the characteristics of Chinese historiography and emphasized on the accuracy, authenticity, credibility and reliability of Chinese historical documentation.

The evolution of the territorial relationship between, consecutive empire of Ming, Qing, and finally PRC, over Tibet according to the classification in the Chinese documents was studied. The speaker posed three central questions to examine the term 'antiquity' in the claims of PRC over Tibet.

1. Was Tibet part of the Ming Empire according to the PRC?
2. Was Tibet Part of the Ming Empire according to the Qing Document?
3. Was Tibet part of Ming Empire according to the Ming Government?

According to the volume on Ming history of official PRC history, there is a record of a commanding officer to Tibet, which is used in PRC to validate its claims over Tibet since antiquity.

In the annals of history compiled by the Qing dynasty of the Ming empire, the geography sections interestingly talk about ethnic rulers affiliated to the central empire. However, these regions were not part of the central empire. According to Qing documentation, the ruler of Tibet extended his regions affiliation to the Ming empire but was not an integral part of the empire.

The speaker points out that PRC can argue over the reliability of this document further purporting it as an effort by the succeeding Qing dynasty to belittle the Ming dynasty.

Now, Ming dynasty's compilation of history was rooted in the tradition of the Tang dynasty where unification records of all territorial claims were documented. In the 90-volume documentation, there are details of the extents of the territory of the Ming empire. The region of Tibet, according to the document is unambiguously classified as a foreign region, rendering it beyond the limits of the empire.

Further, the speaker, with an official Map of the Ming Dynasty, conveyed the boundaries of the Ming Empire and the fact that Tibet lay beyond it. To verify the authenticity, a copy of the Ming empire map from German sources was compared. Yet, similar conclusions were drawn implying that the Ming empire in its 276-year reign has been consistent in indicating that Tibet lay beyond its boundary. Moreover, in a narrative of a historical episode in the Ming empire from the Ming dynasty documents, Tibet was unambiguously referred to "as a region beyond our boundaries", thus further furnishing the claims of the PRC over Tibet since antiquity invalid.

Mr. Hon-Shiang Lau, in conclusion reiterated the reliability and accuracy of Chinese historical documents that unequivocally overrules the Chinese claims of sovereignty over Tibet since antiquity.

During the Q&A session, the fact that Chinese government can refute the map which the speaker used by claiming that the map is from a period when China was politically weak was brought up. It was suggested that because of this weakened state, the border-area region could have branched out of the mainland, claiming their independence. The speaker responded by asserting that, the Ming Dynasty was one of the strongest era in China. And that Tibet's position as a foreign region was recorded in an era when the Chinese empire was at its peak. Therefore, the PRC's historical claim over Tibet, is false and this can be proved through documents approved by the Chinese government.

Report Prepared by Sukanya Bali, Research Intern, ICS.

About the Speaker

Hon-Shiang Lau received his Bachelor of Engineering from the University of Singapore in 1969 and Ph.D. in business administration from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1973. He was Regents Professor of Management Science at Oklahoma State University (U.S.A.) from 1987 to 2000 and Chair Professor of Operations Management at the City University of Hong Kong from 2000 to 2011. In 2010 he was identified by a U.S. academic journal as one of the 50 most widely-published operations-management scholars worldwide. He retired in 2011 to devote most of his time to learning Chinese history.

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