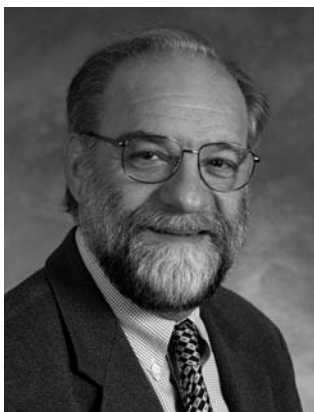


## Tibetan-Chinese Relations—An EAA Interview with A. Tom Grunfeld



A. Tom Grunfeld is SUNY Distinguished Professor at Empire State College of the State University of New York. Grunfeld is widely sought as a speaker and commentator on China-Tibet issues and on US policy regarding the Tibetan independence movement. Grunfeld is the author of several books including *The Making of Modern Tibet* and over 150 articles and book reviews, many of which address Tibet and China related-issues. In late spring

2009, he graciously consented to the following interview with Lucien Ellington.

**Lucien:** *In a recent article that appeared in an ASIANetwork publication, you asserted that Americans feel more about Tibet than they know.\* Please elaborate upon this point.*

**Tom Grunfeld:** Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the Western world (Europe and North America) has been fascinated with Tibet. Westerners were excluded from Tibet, which did not deter them from trying to get there. However, the less successful they were in reaching Tibet, the greater the development of a mythical Tibet fueled by charlatan “spiritual guides,” and books and films like *Lost Horizon*. This fantasy became the hook on which the Dalai Lama and his supporters built an international campaign in the late 1980s. This campaign relied heavily, especially in its early years, on perpetuating this myth of a Tibet that was nonviolent, environmentally friendly, spiritually advanced, and led by the most enlightened and benign leaders. In my experience, many of the Americans affiliated with the various “Free Tibet” campaigns have, in their emotional commitment to either Tibetan Buddhism and/or the political campaign, largely bought into the myth. I know that I am generalizing, but the ones I tend to meet, and the written materials that I read, demonstrate little real knowledge, and, sadly, little interest, in the complexities of the historical record.

I should also note that another consequence of the global prominence of Tibet has been an explosion in serious scholarship and intellectual interest that will, in the long-run, have a profound influence on our understanding of the genuine Tibet and, eventually, end the mythologizing.

**Lucien:** *Although readers interested in learning more about Tibet in general, or the Tibet-China question in particular, will find recommended sources, including your own work, at the conclusion of this interview, what are the most critical points about the history of Tibetan-Chinese relations that those who require context to better understand the contemporary situation most need to consider?*

**Tom Grunfeld:** Tibet and China have had relations of one sort or another for centuries. For example, there was tea trade from Sichuan province that provided one of the staples of the Tibetan diet; and, there were bonds between Buddhist monasteries in Tibet and China, as well as the oft-described political relations. The text of the first treaty (821 CE) between the two is carved on a stone pillar in front of the Jokhang Temple in the heart of Lhasa. Tibet sent many official delegations to

China over the centuries, right up to the 1930s. All of these ties were between central Tibet and the Chinese state. Those Tibetans who lived in northern and eastern Tibet (Amdo/Kham) also had personal relations with the Chinese since they lived amongst them.

This was a very complicated relationship. There were formal relations between Lhasa and Chinese Imperial Governments that were ruled, at different times, by Han Chinese, Mongols, and Manchus. Tibetan exiles will argue that relations with the latter two were directly with the ethnic group, rather than the Chinese state; Chinese argue otherwise. This is the crux of the argument about history. There is little dispute about the events but considerable disagreement about the interpretation of those events. There can be no doubt, however, that when Tibet became a part of the People’s Republic of China in 1951, the relationship changed drastically. Tibet, for the first time, was fully integrated into the Chinese state and more Chinese arrived than had ever been there before.

These centuries-long relationships countenanced some officials in the Dalai Lama’s government to argue that he should work with Beijing during the 1950s. The Dalai Lama left Lhasa twice during that period and voluntarily returned both times, although others, including his two older brothers, were urging him to leave.

**Lucien:** *The Dalai Lama is an international figure, and both a religious and political leader. Please opine on his successes and failures as a political leader.*

**Tom Grunfeld:** Without a doubt, the greatest political success has been the international campaign. Before its launch, the number of Americans who were politically engaged with Tibet probably numbered in the three figures. Now there are tens, if not hundreds, of thousands around the world. The Dalai Lama has become a household name with Hollywood and music personalities as well as with his followers. He travels the globe and meets world leaders. The issue of Tibet has certainly achieved an extraordinary prominence; no other independence movement has achieved anywhere near such popularity.

Beyond the political successes, he has managed to transplant Tibetan culture into exile, established monasteries, gained countless converts, and helped foster an academic field of study. Even though there are less than 150,000 Tibetans in exile (there are approximately six million in China) the cultural traditions thrive, as does the intellectual inquiry into all aspects of Tibetan history and culture.

As to failures, there is none greater than his inability to achieve any change in conditions inside Tibet. Indeed, one of the great ironies of this story is that for all the success of the international campaign outside the boundaries of China, it has made things worse inside Tibet.

Since the late 1970s, there has been a struggle within the Chinese leadership over how to deal with Tibet. Reduced to its simplest form, the argument is whether mechanically to adapt policies meant for Chinese areas to that of the ethnic minorities, or whether there have to be specific policies for these latter areas that take into account their unique cultural, social, and economic characteristics. In the 1980s, officials who supported the latter argument were in charge of policy toward Tibet, and they assured Tibetans of cultural security, freedom to practice their religion, favoring the Tibetan language, etc. In January 1989, the Dalai Lama had an opportunity to visit Beijing and negotiate directly with Chinese leaders. He declined the invitation and one of the consequences of his decision was the coming to power of officials who

believe that no special provisions should be made for the Tibetans, or any other minorities for that matter. Indeed, they believe assimilation is the best long-term solution for the difficulties in Tibet.

These officials have been successful in strengthening their power by using the international campaign, the rock concerts, the Dalai Lama's visits with foreign leaders, Congressional declarations of support for the Tibetan cause, etc. as "evidence" that foreign powers—especially the United States—are determined to "split" China and to weaken it, in order to prevent further economic and technological development, so that China will be unable to take its rightful place in the world as a major power. In other words, the more successful the international campaign is in garnering publicity, and the greater the number of foreign officials who admonish China for its policies in Tibet, the more ammunition these officials have to stoke Chinese nationalism and xenophobia, and remain in power.

**Lucien:** *The March 2008 demonstrations in Tibet and the great publicity that surrounded the Tibetan issue during the Beijing Olympics seemed to work to China's political disadvantage. Have there been any developments in the latter part of 2008 and thus far in 2009 to change what appeared to be an impasse in negotiations between the Chinese Government and Tibet?*

**Tom Grunfeld:** The demonstrations across the entire Tibetan plateau (perhaps as many as 125) were an astonishing event—no doubt as shocking to Chinese officials in Beijing as they were to us outside China. It was the clearest exhibition to date of how widespread Tibetan discontent is.

China suffered a public relations disaster with the journey of the Olympic torch around the world and over some of the circumstances during the Olympics themselves. For example, they set up public sites for demonstrations of grievances and then did not approve them, and even arrested some who applied to demonstrate. Another example was the parade of children in the national costumes of the fifty-five "national minorities," when all the children were of Han origin.

However, the Sichuan earthquake shifted the world's attention from Tibet, and China began to be seen more as a victim rather than the victimizer, as it had been viewed in spring 2008.

Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that in the Tibetan-inhabited areas, political repression and the extensive deployment of paramilitary forces after the widespread demonstrations, and fear of further unrest during a series of very sensitive anniversaries in 2009, only exacerbated the ethnic tensions. In this regard, the situation is probably getting worse rather than better.

**Lucien:** *Although it is impossible to accurately forecast what will happen in the future, particularly when the Dalai Lama dies or ceases to be an international figure, please share with our readers logical scenarios when either of these events occur that might affect the China-Tibet situation.*

**Tom Grunfeld:** As I write this, the most extensive round of talks between the Dalai Lama and Beijing have come to an abrupt and ignominious end. Both sides are now using extreme language to denounce each other—language designed to undermine further dialogue. Given the rising ethnic tensions inside Tibet, due largely to the Chinese policy of ignoring cultural rights in favor of economic development in the belief that if Tibetans have sufficient material well-being their ethnic identity will diminish, the situation can only get worse. There are possible solutions, but in order for them to be implemented, the current officials in charge of Tibet policy must be shunted aside. There are others in China who favor a different approach, such as guaranteeing cultural

security for Tibetans, but they would need to return to power and revive the policies that were implemented during the 1950s and 1980s.

When the Dalai Lama dies, the most likely scenario will be that two children purported to be the Dalai Lama's incarnation will be found—one among the exiles and another by the Chinese government. It is unlikely the Chinese choice will have much resonance with Tibetans, given their already considerable mistrust of the government in Beijing. The Panchen Lama, who was selected by the Chinese government several years ago, has very little support among Tibetans.

The traditional selection process could be problematic for the exiles, for if a boy is picked a few years after the Dalai Lama dies, he will be three to five years old, and unable to assume office until he reached his majority. That leaves almost a quarter of a century without a Dalai Lama, and historically that has meant considerable internal political conflict among various religious factions over the role of the Regent, who rules until the Dalai Lama is ready to take over. Given the circumstance of being in exile, their cause would be severely disadvantaged without a strong leader for such an extended period.

There is a possible Regent in the Kharmpa Lama, a young man who was born and raised in China, who speaks Chinese as well as Tibetan and who, according to all reports, is intelligent and capable. The problem is that he is from a different Tibetan Buddhist religious tradition than the Dalai Lamas, and Tibetans have a history of fierce religious politics. If such a struggle emerged, it could possibly sunder the exile community irreparably.

**Lucien:** *Tom, thanks for the interview!* ■

\* A. Tom Grunfeld, "Toward Knowledge—Not Just a Feeling—About Tibet," *ASIANetwork EXCHANGE* XVI, 1: Fall 2008, 26–36.

#### A. Tom Grunfeld's Recommended Tibet Readings

Melvyn C. Goldstein, William Siebenschuh, Tashi Tsering, *The Struggle for Modern Tibet: The Autobiography of Tashi Tsering* (New York: East Gate Books, 1997). This is the best book for the complete novice. It introduces modern Tibet in a most readable way; the story of an extraordinary life in the latter half of the twentieth century and a good introduction to Tibet as it was.

Heinrich Harrer, translated by Robert Graves. *Seven Years in Tibet* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1954). This work is almost sixty years old, but it is a wonderful adventure story written before the Tibet issue became polemical. Its description of life, of both the poor and the wealthy before the arrival of the Chinese, is compelling.

Orville Schell, *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, LLC, 2000). This is a discussion of the three Tibets: the Western mythological one (and Hollywood's role in perpetuating it), the Chinese mythological one, and the real Tibet.

Barry Sautman and June Teufel Dreyer, eds., *Contemporary Tibet: Politics, Development, and Society in a Disputed Region* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2005). The book has a series of chapters by Western, Tibetan, and Chinese scholars of Tibet, with a wide range of subjects, including a chapter by me entitled "Tibet and the United States."

Tom Grunfeld, "The Advantages and Perils of Globalization: The Case of Tibet," in *As China Meets the World: China's Changing Position in the International Community*, edited by Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, Agnes Schick-Chen, and Sascha Klotzbücher (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften [Austrian Academy of Sciences Press], 2006). This is a discussion of how the Tibet Lobby was formed and how it achieved its remarkable success.

John Kenneth Knaus, *Orphans of the Cold War. America and the Tibetan Struggle for Survival* (New York: PublicAffairs), 2000. This is the best book about the CIA operation with the Tibetans by one CIA officer who was directly involved. Until more documents become declassified, this is the best history we will get of these events.

Wang, Lixiong and Tsering Shakya, *Struggle for Tibet* (London: Verso Press, 2006). This is a discussion between Shakya, a Tibetan-born, British-educated historian of Tibet, and Wang, a Beijing-based author who has thought about and written provocatively on Tibet.