

The End of the Manchu Dynasty and Tibetan Independence

Written by Matteo Miele

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MATTEO MIELE, AUG 12 2022

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On January 1, 1912, the Republic of China was proclaimed.^[1] The Hsin-hai Revolution, which had commenced on October 10, 1911, quickly put an end to the Empire, but at the same time the institutional changes broke those ancient ties that had held together diverse territories. From the point of view of the newly formed Republic of China, however, the end of the Ch'ing dynasty did not mean the end of the unity of the Empire's regions. New independent countries were firmly denied by the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China of March 1912^[2] which assigned five members of the Senate (*Ts'an i yüan* 參政院) to each province, Inner and Outer Mongolia and Tibet, while Ch'ing-hai – which largely corresponds to the Tibetan A-mdo – was entitled to a senator (Article 18). The indissolubility of the territory of the former Ch'ing Empire was therefore recognized, ignoring Mongolian independence that had been declared a few months earlier. The flag of the Republic itself had to symbolize this unity: each colored strip was associated with the country's main ethnic groups, namely the Hans (red), the Manchus (yellow), the Mongols (blue), the Muslims (white) and the Tibetans (black).^[3] The anti-Manchu republicans thus preserved the concept of the unity of the «five races» (*wu tsu* 五族), but as understood in the last year of the dynasty, ignoring that in its original meaning, at the time of Ch'ien-lung, this view represented a rigid separation, albeit under the authority of the emperor.^[4] This change of perspective questioned the very idea of China; it was a further step along the path started with the Opium Wars and directed towards the transformation of China into a modern state. New China, in addition to relating to other countries on a formally equal level, was now building a different administrative, institutional, and even social order. However, it had been a *de facto* one-sided transformation, also because the Manchus themselves had been decidedly reluctant to take part in this metamorphosis during the Empire.^[5] Above all, however, at the fall of the dynasty, there was no acceptance of the Republic by the Tibetans and the Mongols, regardless of the new roles that each minority now had to play.

The end of the Manchu dynasty: renunciations and conditions

P'u-i, a child and the last emperor of the Ch'ing dynasty and of China – if we exclude the Yüan Shih-k'ai's pathetic attempt at restoration – abdicated on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month of his third year of reign (Hsuan-tung 宣統, this was the name of P'u-yi as the reigning emperor), that is, February 12, 1912,^[6] a few days after he was six years old. The signature on the document, in the name of the adopted son, had been affixed by the empress mother, Lung-yü, who still on December 28 had tried a last desperate option of an edict for the convening of a National Convention.^[7] Before mid-January 1912, the secretary of Yüan Shih-k'ai had informed Jordan that the probable abdication was imminent.^[8] In fact, it seems that Mongolian independence – declared a few weeks earlier and which will be discussed later – was decisive in writing the word end to the millenary imperial history of China and to the centuries-old Manchu dynasty.^[9] The text of the abdication called for the unity of the Manchu, Han, Mongol, Hui and Tibetan territories in «one great Republic of China» ('大清國皇帝溥儀退位詔書'). Another document also defined the terms relating to the treatment and guarantees due to P'u-i, the Ch'ing dynasty and also to ethnic groups.^[10] The little child was assured, among other things, the maintenance of the *tsun hao* 尊號,

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the imperial name ('大清'), the treatment reserved by the authorities of the Republic for a foreign sovereign ('大清皇帝') and a series of guarantees and privileges, including four million tael each year, which were later converted into four million yüan, provided by the Republic ('大清皇帝'), and the residence in the Summer Palace, after temporary accommodation in the Imperial Palace within the Forbidden City.

The Republic also ensured the protection of the ancestral temple and tombs of the dynasty ('大清'). The violation of this promise in the 1920s^[11] – among the many offenses of the republican government – was perhaps the most tragic outrage for the young P'u-i.^[12] A second part of the agreement, as mentioned, concerned the members of the imperial family: they were guaranteed their titles ('大清'), were equated with other citizens of the Republic as regards «public rights and private rights» ('大清'), exempt from military service ('大清') and their private properties were to be protected ('大清'). As for the «conditions for the treatment of Manchu, Mongolian, Hui and Tibetan ethnic groups» ('大清'), the Republic assured «equality with the Hans» ('大清'), as well as the protection of private property ('大清'), the preservation of the aristocracy ('大清'), the commitment to guarantee sustenance for those nobles in difficulty and for the members of the Eight Banners, the abolition of the previous limitations relating to residence and profession, with consequent freedom to register in any county of the Republic; finally «Manchu, Mongolian, Hui and Tibetan have the freedom to adhere to their ancestral religions» ('大清'). Another edict, among those of February 12, in its final part, in addition to wishing everyone happiness under the new republican regime, also invited Mongols, Tibetans, Muslims and Manchus to erase the ancient divisions and to continue to respect the law.^[13]

The water-buffalo year. The Declaration of Independence

On February 7, 1913, Tibet celebrated the *lo-gsar*, the Tibetan New Year.^[14] Thus the water-buffalo year began. About two weeks earlier, on the sixteenth day of the twelfth month of the year of the water-rat (January 23, 1913), while a very strong wind was blowing over Lhasa, the dalai lama, after the Tibetans had managed to defeat the Chinese soldiers, had returned to the Po-ta-la.^[15] As seen, Thub-bstan-rgya-mtsho had to flee his capital again, in February 1910, escaping from the Chinese troops who had invaded Tibet.^[16] It had been the last, tragic and ephemeral attempt of a dying imperial power. A clear description of the return of the dalai lama to Lhasa comes from a letter written by Haji Ghulam Muhammad, the chief of the Ladakhi traders in Lhasa and sent to the British agent in Rgyal-rtse.^[17] Here is an extract of its English translation:^[18]

On the 16th of the 12th month (23rd January, 1913), on the occasion when the Dalai Lama entered the Potala, all the Thibetan officials, the Gurkhas, the Muhammadans and the heads of the different monasteries went to receive his Holiness the Dalai Lama at a place called Luding (near Drepung monastery). The Dalai Lamas came riding in Mongolian dress accompanied by twelve attendants. All the troops and the people there saluted him. His Holiness then changed into a Lama's dress at Luding and blessed the people in a tent. All the Thibetan, Gurkha and Muhammadan officials were allowed to sit in his presence. At 12 o'clock his Holiness entered his palanquin. When he was going towards the Potala, a very strong wind arose and the thousands of people, who were waiting to see him, were unfortunately unable to obtain a view of him.

On the 18th (25th January, 1913), a quarrel took place between the Thapin^[19] troops and the Gya-dzong^[20] troops. Thinking that there might be a serious fight, Lheding Depon went to stop the quarrel. The Gya-dzong troops threw stones at him (Lheding Depon), and he ran away. On the 19th (26th January, 1913), three Gya-dzong soldiers killed one Thupin soldier by striking him with the back of their swords.

On the 22nd (29th January, 1913), the Thibetan Government posted police in Lhasa city and at the Sho (below Potala).

The Thibetan Government have punished Rampa Shap-pe^[21] and Kalon Lama Temang Chho-trak by degrading them two grades below their former rank, and by fining them [...].

Both of them have been retained in Thibetan Government service.

On the 29th (3rd February, 1913), the Thibetan Government arrested seven men of Tengyeling monastery^[22] and imprisoned them. All the rest of the monks of Tengyeling monastery have been sent to different estates and monasteries where they will be kept under surveillance.

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The 1st of the 1st month (7th February, 1913), was the New Year. On the 2nd (8th February, 1913), all the Thibetan, Muhammadan and Gurkha officials went to the Potala to offer their scarves as usual. The new year's arrangements were made as in previous years by the Thibetan Government.

On the 3rd (9th February, 1913), I went to pay my respects to Lonchen Chhang-khyim (Tre-kang). He informed me that the Thibetans are now the masters of Thibet. The foreign Powers, viz., Great Britain, Russia, Japan, France, and Germany, have recognised the independence of Thibet. Moreover, Russia, Japan and Great Britain are helping the Thibetans. As the country which immediately borders on Thibet is British, the Thibetans are confident of being supported by the British, and therefore they rely solely on the British Government. From what he (Lonchen) said it appears that the Thibetans have received intimation from Russia to the effect that the Russian Government has addressed the British Government with a view to affording help to the Thibetans, as the nearest country to Thibet is British.

The Thibetans have received a communication from the Chinese President, to the effect that the Thibetans and Chinese should preserve their friendship as before, and that he (President) proposes to send an official to discuss matters. Thibetan Government have replied to the President saying that the Dalai Lama does not desire the titles conferred on him by China. Although Thibet and China were previously on terms of mutual friendship, on account of the relationship of the priest and the Lay, lately they have not been on good terms. The Thibetans have now regained their power, and the Yellow sect religion is prospering. If a Chinese representative comes to discuss matters with the Thibetan Government he must not come by the original route (*i.e.*, by land), as they cannot allow him to do so. If a Chinese representative is sent by the sea route (*i.e.*, through India, a representative of the Thibetan Government can be sent to Darjeeling to discuss matters. The Thibetans cannot allow Chinese representatives to enter Thibet.

It is proposed to concentrate in Lhasa city annually, at the great yearly festival (held in 1st month, *i.e.*, about February) 1,000 monks from each of the three great monasteries. On the 3rd (9th February, 1913), 1,000 monks from the Sera, and 1,000 from the Ganden monastery reached Lhasa, but none came from Drepung monastery as the monks of Drepung monastery are not on friendly terms with the Sera and Ganden monks. The head of the Drepung monastery requested that he might be excused from attending the festivals, but on the 4th (11th [*sic*, 10th *recte*] February, 1913), the leave applied for was refused. In the meantime, the monks of the Sera and Ganden monasteries began the celebration of the festival. On the 5th (11th February, 1913), a She-ugo (a temporary monk magistrate) of Drepung came to Lhasa (with the Drepung monks) and celebrated the festival. On this account the Sera and Ganden monks did not attend two ceremonies on that date. On the 6th (12th February, 1913), the Sera and Ganden monks were ordered by the Thibetan Government to attend the festivals and to perform the ceremonies. They then attended the festival and ceremonies. All the people in the city are in anxiety, for there is every likelihood of friction between the monks.

On October 28, 1912, Chinese president Yüan Shih-k'ai, probably in an extreme attempt to give himself and China some authority over Tibet, had reassigned the title to the dalai lama,^[23] which the Ch'ing had – with little real effect – formally revoked.^[24] The British were well aware of the inconsistency of that revocation on a religious level.^[25] The Manchus themselves had cited the precedent of the replacement of the sixth dalai lama^[26] and that replacement, as seen, was never recognized by the Tibetans. The dalai lama refused the title by the new Chinese head of state^[27] and declared the independence of Tibet on the eighth day of the first month of 1913.^[28] That text which has actually been considered as a declaration of independence is something different. As Luciano Petech rightly points out, in fact,

il Dalai-Lama si limitò a riassumere con un proclama il governo del paese, ma non completò mai l'ultimo passo dichiarandone l'indipendenza, forse perché le categorie del diritto internazionale non avevano alcun significato per la mentalità tibetana.^[29]

Precisely, in the proclamation the dalai lama reaffirmed his role in Tibet and recalled the main historical points, from the period of Mongol domination to the beginning of the twentieth century, from the ancient relationship based on the principle of *mchod yon*, up to the recent Chinese invasion of the country, with the consequent flight of the ruler to India, followed by the Tibetan victory.^[30] Finally, the religious and social duties of the Tibetans were indicated.^[31] Independence was simply a fact. Petech wrote: 'Egli regnò come se l'alta sovranità cinese non esistesse; né gli interessava il fatto che essa venisse sempre riconosciuta *de jure* da tutte le grandi potenze'.^[32]

On the Tibetan Declaration of Independence

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The collapse of the Manchu dynasty in China between the end of 1911 and the beginning of 1912 had meant breaking the imperial tradition which, among various events, had governed the country since the unification by Ch'in Shih-huang in the third century BC. The fault that passed through the historical, cultural, and philosophical events produced the earthquakes that destroyed the foundations of the dynasty, together with Western and Japanese penetration. Although expanded over the centuries, the confrontation between systems of thought could not fail to create fractures which often left out dynamics that were repeated throughout the nineteenth century with their explosive vitality, giving way to a long series of tragic rebellions.

Certainly, the collapse of the Ch'ing dynasty had broken the relationship between Lhasa and Peking. Formally, the link, as previously noted, was between the dalai lama and his protector and lay disciple, that is, the emperor. So this should already be enough to explain the meaning of the thirteenth dalai lama's Declaration of Independence. However, another reflection must also be added to this reasoning. The Chinese repression in the last years of the Empire carried out by Chao Erh-feng and the policy of sinization of Tibet were naturally part of a broader mechanism centered on a new idea of empire. Until the first half of the nineteenth century the Chinese Empire was truly the Middle Kingdom, in the sense that it existed in a system of international relations, largely limited to East, Southeast and Inner Asia, which certainly placed it at the cultural, economic, and diplomatic center of that world. Therefore, the relationship with Tibet or with other peripheral countries, whether they were tributaries or not, was also explained within that system. The *mchod yon* bond was sufficient, as it had been for the Mongol predecessors, to explain the relationship between Lhasa and Peking. The case of the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century was different. Tibet had been abandoned and the very cause of the Younghusband Expedition was precisely the British need to establish a direct communication between the Raj and Tibet given the inability of the Manchus to exercise their own suzerainty and therefore to impose anything on the Tibetans. The defense of the road to Lhasa, traveled by the troops of the most powerful empire of the time, had been left in the hands of a small, almost medieval army. So, in what capacity could the empire still compare itself to a protective power? The answer was given, precisely, in the titles. A title was assigned, as we have seen, to the dalai lama who, in 1908, after centuries of substantial autonomy, became the 'the Loyally Submissive Vice-gerent',^[33] an *ad hoc* creation of the dynasty to formally retain its role. At the same time, moreover, the Ch'ing had tried to claim a new title 'Emperor of China and Tibet', which the British refused to accept.^[34] This was a betrayal of Chinese history. «China» in Chinese is simply 中国 Chung-kuo the «Middle (中) Country (国)».^[35] A country that over the millennia recognized, through its own name, its centrality in the world, now implored the recognition of a title from the West.

In a certain sense, therefore, the Western political view – rather than the collapse of the dynasty – broke that link between Peking and Lhasa; it could survive, conveniently for both sides, only in the traditional Chinese and Tibetan system of relations. When one of the two parties tried to impose itself on the other, the bond was deprived of its historical and cultural foundation. From this point of view, republican China's fatuous claims on Tibet and the concrete invasion of the People's Republic of China are nothing more than the natural continuation of that idea about Tibet drawn by the dying Ch'ing Empire. And so, while deciphering the declaration of independence of Tibet, we must consider also this Chinese understanding of its new role in a wider world. It is the drama of the empires that extend over the whole world and mark their borders with the *hic sunt leones*. When those borders open, however, the impact is devastating for traditional structures. Tibet immediately before the declaration of independence was for China nothing more than an attempt to reason according to a Western scheme, given the failure of the Eastern one.

However, if Peking was seeking – paradoxically – on the peaks of the Himālaya a European legitimacy for its institutions, Lhasa, in addition to not being willing to indulge such political mirages, also rejected the same model that Westerners had imported. For the thirteenth dalai lama, as well as for his successor until the Communist invasion, there were still lions in the rest of the world. A final consideration concerns the very figure of Thub-bstan-rgya-mtsho. At the time of the declaration of independence, he was thirty-seven. A rare case. The other successors of the Great Fifth had either lived too little or had not actually exercised power except for an extremely limited time.^[36] The ninth dalai lama had died as a child and his immediate successors passed away still very young.^[37] The eighth dalai lama, Byams-spel-rgya-mtsho, born in 1758 died in 1804, but had ruled the country only between 1786 and 1788.^[38] Thub-bstan-rgya-mtsho was attempting to restore the authority that many of his predecessors had hardly touched. It was the very institution of the dalai lama that for too long had been relegated to a formal office. The collapse of the empire on the one hand and an adult Dalai Lama on the other were two conditions which, when combined, gave Tibet the

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possibility of achieving independence under the Yellow School.

[1] See, among others: LARY 2007, pp. 14-79; R. MITTER, *1911: The Unanchored Chinese Revolution*, in: *The China Quarterly*, No. 208 (December 2011), pp. 1009-1020; G. WANG, *To Reform a Revolution: Under the Righteous Mandate*, in: *Dædalus*, Vol. 122, no. 2, 1993, pp. 71-94.

[2] The full text of the constitution is in the appendix (???) of KAO LAO ???, *Hsin-hai ke-ming shih* [????], Shanghai [??] 12 [1923], pp. 59-68.

[3] A. MA LYNN, *Muslims in China*, translated by P. Lan Lin and C. Fang, Indianapolis 2004, p. 45.

[4] TUTTLE 2005, pp. 59-61.

[5] TUTTLE 2005, pp. 60-61.

[6] The text of the act of abdication is in Lin shih kung pao [????], [????????????????] (February 13, 1912), *Pei-ching* [??] 1912, pp. 003-004.

[7] M. DILLON, *China: A Modern History*, London – New York 2012, p. 147.

[8] TNA, FO 405/208, No. 67, Sir J. Jordan to Sir Edward Grey, January 14, 1912, p. 100.

[9] This according to information obtained from the Japanese government: TNA, FO 405/208, No. 69, Sir C. MacDonald to Sir Edward Grey, January 16, 1912, p. 101.

[10] Full text: Lin shih kung pao [????], [????????????????] (February 13, 1912), *Pei-ching* [??] 1912, pp. 005-007.

[11] E. J. M. RHOADS, *Manchus and Han: ethnic relations and political power in late Qing and early Republican China, 1861-1928*, Seattle – London 2000, pp. 250-251.

[12] See R. F. JOHNSTON, *Twilight in the Forbidden City*, New York 1934, pp. 444-445.

[13] Lin shih kung pao [????], [????????????????] (February 13, 1912), *Pei-ching* [??] 1912, pp. 04-05.

[14] TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 3 in No. 181, Letter addressed to British Trade Agent, Gyantse, p. 157 the letter, dated February 14, 1913, was written by Haji Ghulam Muhammad, who was the chief of the Ladakhi traders in Lhasa, as explained in TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 2 in No. 181, British Trade Agent, Gyantse, to Government of India, February 21, 1913, p. 156.

[15] TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 3 in No. 181, Letter addressed to British Trade Agent, Gyantse, pp. 156-158.

[16] TNA, FO 535/13, Enclosure in No. 30*, Government of India to Viscount Morley. (Communicated by India Office, March 2, 1910), March 2, 1910, p. 22*. On the dalai lama in India see BELL 1946, pp. 82-130.

[17] TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 2 in No. 181, British Trade Agent, Gyantse, to Government of India, February 21, 1913, p. 156.

[18] Full text: TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 3 in No. 181, Letter addressed to British Trade Agent, Gyantse, p. 156-158.

[19] According to a footnote to the translation: “New troops composed of men of mixed Chinese and Thibetan parentage”, TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 3 in No. 181, Letter addressed to British Trade Agent, Gyantse, p. 157.

[20] According to a footnote to the translation: “The old regular troops”, TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 3 in No. 181,

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Letter addressed to British Trade Agent, Gyantse, p. 157.

[21] According to a footnote to the translation: "These are two Shap-pes whom the Thibetan Government imprisoned for being pro-Chinese", TNA, FO 535/16, Enclosure 3 in No. 181, Letter addressed to British Trade Agent, Gyantse, p. 157.

[22] Bstan-rgyas-gling monastery had suffered a long siege by the Tibetans because it housed Chinese soldiers. In 1913 it was destroyed (GOLDSTEIN 1989, pp. 63-64 and p. 109).

[23] Chinese text of the decree: *Chung kuo Hsi tsang she hui li shih tzu liao* [?][?][?][?][?][?][?][?], edited by Chin Hui [?][?], Jen I-nung [?][?][?] and Ma Nai-hui [?][?][?], Pei-ching [?][?] 1994, p. 38. For its English translation see Presidential Mandate of October 28, 1912 (Translated from the Government Gazette), published in E. TEICHMAN, *Travels of a Consular Officer in Eastern Tibet, Together with a History of the Relations between China, Tibet and India*, Cambridge 1922, pp. 17-18.

[24] TNA, FO 535/13, No. 21, Translation of Telegram from Wai-wu Pu, dated the 25th instant, received in London on the evening of the same day.-(Communicated by Chinese Minister, February 26, 1910.), p. 18; TNA, FO 535/13, Enclosure in No. 50, Wai-wu Pu to Sir J. Jordan, March 9, 1910, p. 50. Text of the proclamation in Chinese: YA HAN-CHANG [?][?][?] 1984, pp. 230-231.

[25] TNA, FO 535/13, Enclosure in No. 23, Government of India to Viscount Morley, February 27, 1910, p. 19.

[26] TNA, FO 535/13, Enclosure in No. 50, Wai-wu Pu to Sir J. Jordan, March 9, 1910, p. 51.

[27] ZHWA SGAB PA DBANG PHYUG BDE LDAN, Vol. II 1976, p. 219.

[28] The full text of the Tibetan declaration of independence in Tibetan is in ZHWA SGAB PA DBANG PHYUG BDE LDAN, Vol. II 1976, pp. 219-223.

[29] PETECH 1981, p. 298.

[30] ZHWA SGAB PA DBANG PHYUG BDE LDAN, Vol. II 1976, pp. 219-221.

[31] ZHWA SGAB PA DBANG PHYUG BDE LDAN, Vol. II 1976, pp. 221-223.

[32] PETECH 1981, p. 298.

[33] TNA, FO 535/11, Inclosure 1 in No. 121, Extract from the "Peking Gazette" of November 3, 1908, Imperial Decree issued in the name of the Empress Dowager, p. 105.

[34] TNA, FO 535/11, No. 115, Sir J. Jordan to Sir Edward Grey, October 15, 1908, p. 100.

[35] Originally the term designated the area of fiefdoms around the domain of the Chou kings (Eastern Chou period), A. CHENG, *Storia del pensiero cinese*, Vol. I: Dalle origini allo «studio del Mistero», Italian translation by A. Crisma, Torino 2000, p. 41.

[36] PETECH 1959, pp. 372-376.

[37] PETECH 1959, pp. 374-376.

[38] PETECH 1959, pp. 373-374.

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