

# Editorial

ELISABETH ALLÈS AND FRANÇOISE ROBIN

Six decades after the People's Liberation Army entered Lhasa, the Tibet problem continues to fester. It erupts through recurring protests by the Tibetan people. Protest movements shook the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) in 1987-1989, but rocked the larger Tibetan high plateau on a larger scale in 1956-1959 and more recently in the spring of 2008.

Multiple and complex causes lie behind these movements. What is the role of economic concerns, or of political and cultural demands? Does religion lie behind the rebellion? Do the growing numbers of Han and Hui settlers in Tibet's cities vitiate the situation? Do forced sedentarisation policies fuel the fires? Does the Chinese leadership's approach to the Tibet issue, especially with regard to rights and liberties, help resolve problems or aggravate them?

These questions apply more generally to the governance of China's border regions and are not specific to Tibet. They have been raised and continue to be raised with regard to Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang, although Tibet's case stands out because of the Dalai Lama's stature and the enormous sympathy worldwide for Tibetans. Sun Yatsen's conception of the Chinese nation as being composed of five peoples (Han, Tibetan, Mongol, Manchu, and Hui<sup>(1)</sup>) was at the heart of building the nation state of "China" right from the early twentieth century. Since 1949, the People's Republic of China has recognised 55 minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*) but its policies have swung between relatively liberal and repressive phases, between recognition of religious and cultural identities and of assimilation. In this regard, the assimilation of Mongols in Inner Mongolia, which began in the late Qing dynasty, is a significant example.<sup>(2)</sup>

As the notion of a *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation) became central for the Chinese government, it was seen as the essential basis for legitimising its authority. The anthropologist Uradyn E. Bulag has emphasised: "In light of the Soviet collapse, the Chinese state has adopted a new way of managing its multinational empire. Despite its multicultural guise, China is actually reviving the notion of a single Chinese people (*Zhonghua minzu*), which the Chinese Communists earlier condemned as Han chauvinism."<sup>(3)</sup> A revealing move in this regard was the change in 2008 of the *Zhongyang Minzu Daxue's* English name from Central University of Nationalities to Minzu University of China.<sup>(4)</sup> Moreover, the manner in which the Chinese government treats the peoples in the border regions reflects the regime's

authoritarian nature as well as its relations with the population as a whole, minority or majority. Seen in this framework and as Wang Lixiong's analysis in this issue shows, local leaders play a major role in the aggravation or resolution of conflicts. Many examples, such as corruption cases, show the increasing power of local authorities in their dealings with the centre, which often appears weak.

This special issue brings together the conflicting views and criticisms of Tibetologists and Sinologists from different disciplines. An initial meeting took place in the autumn of 2008 in Paris, which afforded a tentative exchange of views.<sup>(5)</sup> The aim was to go beyond clichés to understand the events of 2008.

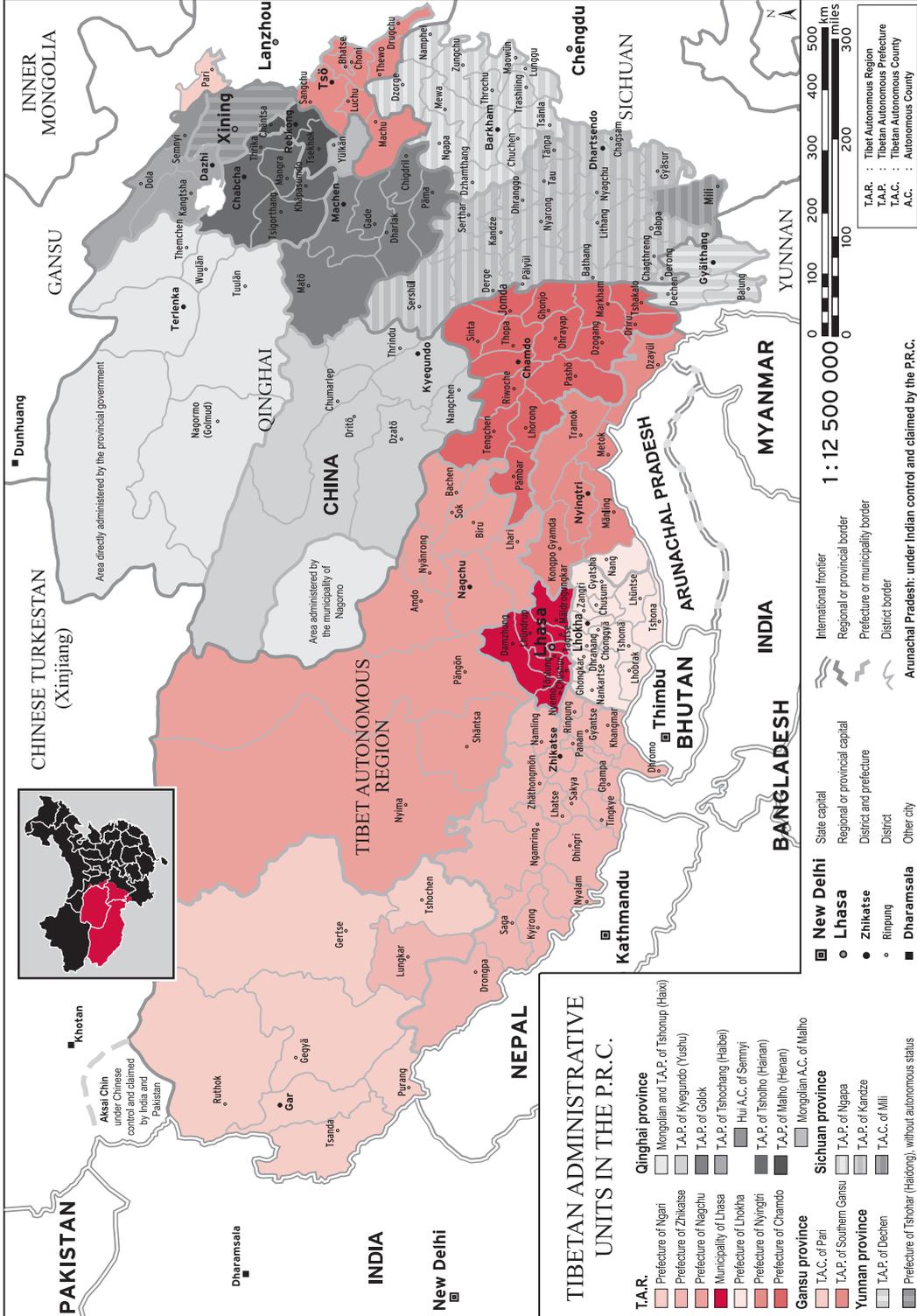
Our attention has focused on some insufficiently discussed points concerning Tibet, by which we mean the whole of the Tibetan cultural sphere (TAR, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan<sup>(6)</sup>). Given the constraints of time and space, we have had to leave out the consideration of education<sup>(7)</sup> and language<sup>(8)</sup> and the situation of Tibetans in exile.<sup>(9)</sup>

This issue begins with a detailed description and analysis of

1. In the early twentieth century, the term Hui referred to Muslims. Sun Yatsen used it mainly for the Turcophone peoples, i.e. the Uyghurs today.
2. See Jirgal Burjgin and Naran Bilik, "Contemporary Mongolian Population Distribution, Migration, Cultural Change and Identity," in Robyn R. Iredale, Naran Bilik, Fei Guo (eds.), *China's Minorities on the Move*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2003, pp. 53-68; Uradyn E. Bulag, "Inner Mongolia," in Morris Rossabi (ed.), *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers*, Seattle-London, University of Washington Press, 2004, pp. 84-116.
3. Uradyn E. Bulag, *ibid.*, p. 113.
4. In this instance, the notion of *minzu* takes the sense of "ethnic group" and not "nationality," which would suggest the existence of a nation with a state, as Robert Barnett points out in a note in his article.
5. Under the auspices of CECMC (French Centre for Modern and Contemporary China Studies), the UMR 8173 China-Korea-Japan studies unit of CNRS-EHESS (French National Centre for Scientific Research and School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences) and the Tibet team of the UMR 8155 Centre de recherches sur les civilisations chinoise, japonaise et tibétaine (Research Centre for Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan Civilisations-CNRS-EPHE). This was organised in collaboration with Heather Stoddard, whom we would like to thank profusely. Her beautifully compiled 80 maps of Tibet could unfortunately not be accommodated in this issue.
6. What is known as Xizang (Tibet) in China refers only to the officially carved out Tibet Autonomous Region.
7. *Educational Review* published a special issue in 2008 (vol. 60, n°1) of five articles on Tibetan education, at home as well as in exile. See also: Andrew Fischer, "Educating for Exclusion in Western China: Structural and Institutional Dimensions of Conflict in the Tibetan Areas of Qinghai and Tibet," CRISE Working Paper (July 2009), Oxford, Centre for Research on Inequality, Security and Ethnicity, Queen Elizabeth House. <http://www.crise.ox.ac.uk/abstract.shtml?wp69>.
8. See Nicolas Tournadre, "The Dynamics of Tibetan-Chinese Bilingualism," *China Perspectives*, n° 45, 2003.
9. They represent 3 percent of the total Tibetan population and many studies have already been devoted to them.

Tibetan and Chinese toponyms  
— Equivalence chart

T.A.R.	
Ngari	Ali
Zhikatsé	Xigaze or Rigaze
Nagchu	Naqu
Lhasa	Lasa
Lhokha	Shannan
Nyingtri	Linzi
Chamdo	Changdu
Gansu	
Pari	Tianzhu
Southern Gansu	Ganman
Yunnan	
Dechen	Diqing
Qinghai	
Tshoshar	Haidong
Tshonup	Haixi
Kyegundo	Yushu
Golk	Guoluo
Tshochang	Haibei
Semnyi	Mengyuan
Tsholho	Hainan
Malho	Huangnan
Sichuan	
Ngapa	Aba
Kandze	Ganzi
Mili	Muli



the 2008 events, followed by a series of articles setting out the historical, social, and economic conditions necessary to understanding the causes of the Tibetan protest. Finally, it seemed essential to consider the different voices that have emerged within Chinese society since 2008.

Tibetologist Robert Barnett offers the most exhaustive description to date of the March-April events of 2008. He shows not only the strength of protest movements outside the TAR, but also their implications for rural people and urban youth.

The contested history<sup>(10)</sup> of the Tibetan cultural sphere is considered by the historian Elliot Sperling, who throws light on fluctuations in the PRC's official historiography regarding Tibet's subordination to China. Sperling has translated from the original Tibetan the Tibeto-Mongolian treaty of 1913, discovered in 2006, which conjointly asserts the independence of Tibet and Mongolia. Andrew M. Fischer analyses the data on the TAR's economic development since the 1990s and the "boomerang" effect of the massive investment policies pursued by Beijing, which heightens the region's dependence and marginalises most Tibetans. He also devotes a brief note to the raging debate on population

in Tibet. Completing the picture on the current situation, Françoise Robin considers the sedentarisation of nomadic herders and of the forced relocation of Tibetan farmers.

In a close look at how the events were followed in Beijing, Michel Bonnin examines the ways in which the Chinese government reacted and the parallels with the political rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution. Marie Holzman invokes the courageous individuals who have backed the Tibetans, such as the noted writer Wang Lixiong. Lara Maconi has selected (and translated into French for *Perspectives chinoises*) part of a long analytical text published by Wang on his blog on the Tibet situation and the system's contradictions. In counterpoint, she presents the activities of Chinese nationalist youth, whose views on the Internet reflect a position critical of Tibetan protests that is largely shared by the Chinese population.<sup>(11)</sup> •

• **Translated by N. Jayaram**

10. The term refers also to Xinjiang's contested history. See Gardner Bovingdon, "Contested histories," in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *Xinjiang. China's Muslim Borderland*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2004, pp. 353-374.

11. Although this editorial was drafted before the full ramifications of the 5 July 2009 events in Urumchi came to light, reports of the protests and crackdown there merely confirm the analyses in this issue. The constant political pressure and use of force in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region has had similar effects in Tibet: explosions of anger that meet with renewed repression.