**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**China, Tibet, and the Uses of History (Chapter 8)**

**SLIDE 8.1**

China’s long history of interactions with its neighbors continues to shape the region today, and
interpreting that history can be contentious.

**SLIDE 8.2 [Map: The World of Asian Buddhism]**

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in Tibet, a rugged region of high plateau bordered by the Himalaya Mountains to the south and the heartland of the Chinese cultural zone to the east. For millennia Tibetans have practiced a mixed agriculture of farming and herding in this largely Buddhist region. Since the early 1950s, the People’s Republic of China has controlled and administered Tibet, but a government in exile has long advocated for the region’s independence or at least greater autonomy within the Chinese state.

Both sides point to Tibet’s history to advance their claims, but that history has a complex story to tell. Since the first centralized state emerged in Tibet during the seventh century CE, the region has been independent from China for most of its history during which time it developed a Tibetan civilization centered on a distinctive Buddhist tradition headed by religious leaders known as lamas.

But Tibet was also incorporated into the Chinese empire for significant periods, both in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and from the 1720s to the early twentieth century. During both of these periods, Chinese emperors governed the region through a relationship that saw the Buddhist lamas of Tibet accept Chinese emperors as the Buddhist universal ruler. In return the Chinese emperors accepted the spiritual authority of the lamas in Tibet. In this context, Chinese emperors governed by recognizing and working within the local Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

**SLIDE 8.3**

Over the past half-century this history has been a source of friction and tension. In an interview in 2008, during yet another crackdown on Tibetan protests by Chinese authorities, the Dalai Lama—the leader of the Tibetan government in exile—sought to move beyond the impasse of conflicting histories. “The Chinese government,” he declared, “wants me to say that for many centuries Tibet has been part of China. Even if I make that statement, many people would just laugh. And my statement will not change past history. History is history. So my approach is, don’t talk about the past. The past is past, irrespective of whether Tibet was part of China or not.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Instead, the Dalai Lama focused on the future: “The times are different.” He noted, “Today different ethnic groups and different nations come together due to common sense. Look at the European Union… What is the use of small, small nations fighting each other? Today it’s much better for Tibetans to join [China]. That is my belief.” But he also observed that, “The real guarantee [that Tibet will stay part of the Peoples Republic of China] is that the Tibetan people should be satisfied. Eventually they should feel they would get greater benefit if they remain with China.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

In the present, this possibility seems a distant prospect. Satisfaction among the Tibetan population would almost certainly require recognition and toleration for the region’s distinct Buddhist faith and culture, but Chinese authorities have restricted and persecuted the Buddhist establishment in Tibet over the past half century or more, believing it to be a repository of all things backward. If the Dalai Lama’s vision of the future is to come about, perhaps the long history of Tibet’s relationship to China has a role to play. For that history includes a record of times when Tibetan culture found a recognized place within a larger Chinese state. In this case at least, history does not determine the future, but presents a range of possibilities from which that future can be constructed.

1. http://www.newsweek.com/interview-dalai-lama-tibet-83609 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.newsweek.com/interview-dalai-lama-tibet-83609 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)