

五十一

So we looked at a map
and saw she was right
we'd just scratched the surface
on our line of sight
we had to continue
this road to *somewhere*
so we took a step forward
and said a short prayer



Chapter 51 – The Road to Somewhere

I started in Taiwan, then to Hong Kong. From Hong Kong almost due north to Beijing, mostly along the coast. I had skirted the eastern edge of China. Like visiting the east coast of America from Florida to Massachusetts and thinking I'd seen the USA. The Gobi Desert, the Himalayas, Guilin, the Silk Road, the Terra Cotta Warriors. What else was I missing?

Politically, China has 23 provinces (省 shěng) – if you count Taiwan as a province (which both China and Taiwan do on their maps of “China”). Provinces are like states in the USA. In addition, China has 5 autonomous regions (自治区 zìzhìqū) which are similar to provinces, but each houses major ethnic minority groups which make up much of their populations. Autonomous Regions are supposed to have more freedom to make decisions; 4 municipalities (直辖市 zhíxíashì) which are huge cities which have most of the same rights and responsibilities as provinces; and 2 Special Administrative Regions (特别行政区 tèbié xíngzhèngqū). The two SAR's are Hong Kong and Macau. Both Hong Kong and Macau have “high degrees of autonomy” and enjoy the constitutional principle of “one country, two systems”.

From where we left off after leaving the Great Wall, Inner Mongolia lay to our immediate north. From 1271 to 1368 AD, Kublai Khan (忽必烈汗 Hū bì liè hàn), grandson of Genghis Khan (成吉思汗 Chéng jí sī hàn) officially established the Yuan Dynasty (元朝 Yuán Cháo) where he claimed all of China to be ruled by Mongolia.

The far western part of China is made up of only two regions: the Tibet (Xizang) Autonomous Region (西藏自治区 Xīzàng Zìzhìqū), and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (新疆维吾尔自治区 Xīnjiāng Wéiwú'ěr Zìzhìqū).

Until recently, many people in the Western Hemisphere had never heard of Xinjiang, and Tibet was long associated with esoteric Buddhism, Shang-ri-la, yak butter tea, the Dalai Lama, and more recently, the Tibetan independence movement.

Tibet has an interesting history. Often referred to as the “rooftop of the world”, the average elevation of Tibet is 4,500 meters (nearly 15,000 feet). It was in 1271 AD, that China first claimed a portion of Tibet as its own during the Yuan Dynasty when Kublai Khan reigned. This claim of Chinese suzerainty over Tibet continued through the Ming and well into the Qing Dynasty. In 1912, the Republic of China stipulated Tibet as one of its 22 provinces, but in 1913, Tibet declared its independence from China. In 1951, however, China re-asserted its suzerainty over Tibet when the People's Republic of China and Tibet signed a 17 point agreement

officially reaffirming that Tibet was a part of China. In a poem the Dalai Lama wrote after having met Mao in 1955, the Dalai Lama was a fan of Mao and said, "Only limitless blessing could create such a leader like the sun radiating across the land. His writings are as precious as pearls."

4 years later, at the age of 23, the Dalai Lama left Tibet. An April 20, 1959 Time magazine article described his departure from his homeland this way: "Night had settled upon the roof of the world. With a jingling of harness and the clip-clop of hooves, a small caravan wound slowly up the 17,000-ft. pass. Ahead lay the snowy summits of the Himalayas, an ocean of wind-whipped peaks and ranges that have served Tibet as a rampart since time began. Cavalrymen with slung rifles spurred forward; state officials in furs, wearing the dangling turquoise earrings of their rank, sat tiredly in the saddle; rangy muleteers in peaked caps with big earlaps goaded the baggage train up the steep path. As they passed a cairn of rocks topped by brightly colored flags printed with Buddhist prayers, each pious Tibetan added a stone to the mound, murmured the traditional litany: "So-ya-la-so." (Actually "So-ya-la-so" is a traditional phrase used by Tibetans only when adding stones to a *la-tsa* (a cairn or mound of stones.)



Tibet is the most sparsely populated region of China averaging about 2 people per square kilometre. In The Times of India on April 6, 2017, the Dalai Lama clearly stated "We are not seeking independence. We want China to give us meaningful autonomy. We want to remain with the People's Republic of China." He went on to say. "Tibet is materialistically backward, but spiritually advanced. We want to develop materialistically by remaining with China and it should also feel the same way for mutual benefit."

The 88 year old Dalai Lama has lived in exile in Dharamsala, in the foothills of India for over 60 years. According to a 2023 PEW report, Buddhism “is the largest officially recognized religion in China but images of the Dalai Lam are still forbidden under Chinese law and it is doubtful whether the current Dalai Lama will ever return.” Which brings to bear the question of his successor. But that’s a topic for another day.

About the same size as Iran, Xinjiang can be separated into two distinct regions by the Tianshan Mountains. To the north of the Tianshan Mountains, the people are composed of a variety of minorities including Kazakhs, Mongols, and Russians, and the predominant religion is Buddhism. South of the Tianshan Mountains in the Tarim Basin, live about 8 million Turkish speaking Uyghur people who practice Islam. The modern Uyghurs who look more Turkish than Han Chinese, descend from the Turkic Uyghurs. Occupying a huge portion of the Tarim basin is the Taklamakan Desert (塔克拉玛干沙漠 Tākèlāmǎgān Shāmò). This massive desert has an area about the same size as Germany.

The Chinese first claimed a portion of Xinjiang nearly 2000 years ago during the Han Dynasty. The nomadic people from the far north-western part of Xinjiang supplied Chinese courts with their richest jade as early back as the Shang Dynasty. The name 新疆 Xīnjiāng doesn’t appear until the Qing Dynasty united two major regions of the area into one after the Dungan Revolt in the latter part of the 19th century. Xinjiang can be roughly translated as “New Frontier.”

In the 1990s there were clashes between the 40% Han Chinese and the 47% Uyghurs and in 2009, a series of demonstrations led to 200 people losing their lives and nearly 2000 people suffering injuries in Urumqi. In March 2017, China established new “Regulations on De-extremification” and began arresting Uyghurs and sending them to “re-education camps.”

Laszlo Montgomery offers a fascinating 12-part history of Xinjiang in his China History Podcast which can be found on Teacup Media. Here is a youTube link to the first episode: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtH0_8HgSDE Or you can subscribe to the China History podcast at either: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-china-history-podcast/id489369498> or <https://teacup.media/>

Also:

The Dalai Lama Escapes from China – Time Magazine April 20, 1959 <https://time.com/6258507/dalai-lama-time-cover-1959/>