

*Knowing Tibet: Information Gathering and Policy Consultation in the PRC's Tibet Campaign in the Early 1950s**

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Abstract

This article concentrates on the formation rather than the implementation of People's Republic of China (PRC)'s policies toward Tibet in the early 1950s. In particular, it examines the three stages of information gathering and policy consultation in the PRC's decision-making process regarding Tibet. It argues that before the People's Liberation Army (PLA) entered Tibet, the PRC leaders showed genuine respect for their advisers and took their suggestions seriously, even though not all of these suggestions were politically correct from the Communist perspective, and the advisers were also independent and free enough to express their opinions. After the PLA entered Tibet, PRC officials and PLA officers became investigators who were organized to collect information either for decision making or for justifying decisions that had already been made. These data collectors were no longer independent thinkers since they had to follow detailed and strict guidelines in conducting their fieldwork, and their primary task was not to give advice but to provide raw data. Some leaders now believed that they had learned

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enough about Tibet and therefore no longer needed to seek the opinions of the advisers. Meanwhile, some early advisers had lost their credibility by this time for political reasons. These factors combined to contribute to the suppression of dissenting views regarding Tibet and became one of the possible causes of the radicalization of PRC policies in some Tibetan regions, which prompted the revolt in the late 1950s.

In 1949, as it became clear that the Communists were about to seize all the provinces in Mainland China that were under the control of the Nationalist government, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began to plan for the takeover of political Tibet, a region the Nationalists had never actually ruled but was nevertheless considered to be part of China by both the Nationalists and the Communists.¹ When meeting Stalin's delegate Anastas Mikoyan in February 1949, Mao Zedong affirmed that "the Tibetan problem is not difficult to solve, but we should proceed in a cautious manner and should avoid recklessness."² The two major difficulties that the Communists had to contend with were supplying troops and the ethnic and religious differences between the Tibetans and the Han.² In October 1949, only days after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong ordered the Second Field Army (第二野戰軍 *dì'èr yezhan jun*) of the People's Liberation Army to seize Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, Xikang (西康), and Tibet with its 600,000 troops.³ One month later, he changed his mind and asked Peng Dehuai and his First Field Army (第一野戰軍 *dìyī yezhan jun*) stationed in northwestern China to take responsibility for the military actions in Tibet.⁴ In January 1950, he reversed his order again and instructed that the Second Field Army units in Sichuan would play the leading role in the campaign to incorporate Tibet, whereas the PLA troops in Qinghai, Xinjiang, and Yunnan would serve as secondary forces.⁵

The three commanders of the Second Field Army, Deng Xiaoping, Liu Bocheng, and He Long, who were also leaders of the Southwest Bureau (中共中央西南局 *Zhonggong zhongyang xinan ju*), were thus put in charge of Tibetan affairs. Among the three leaders, Liu Bocheng would depart for Nanjing in late 1950, whereas Deng Xiaoping and He Long left for Beijing in 1952 and 1954, respectively. During their stay in the Southwest, the three would play a crucial part in designing strategies and policies regarding Tibet. In the early 1950s, most policies toward Tibet were first proposed by the leaders of the Southwest Bureau and then