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History of Tibetan and Exile Radio

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History of Tibetan and Exile Radio

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Abstract

Radio has long served as an important source of information and means of communication in Tibet. I discuss the history of wireless communication and broadcasting as it developed in the years before the 1950 invasion and summarize the dismantling of the Tibetan's communication network after the 17 Point Agreement. Next, foreign broadcasting aimed at Tibetans living in China is discussed. American broadcasting is overseen by the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Radio Free Asia and Voice of America carry out broadcasting directed at Tibetans. U.S. government funded broadcasting is particularly controversial; I compare a number of viewpoints on the subject. Voice of Tibet was founded in Norway and focuses only on Tibetan issues in lieu of world news. Finally, I address the question of the efficacy and ethicality of foreign programming in China.

Introduction

A discussion of Tibetan history often points to Tibet's tendency towards isolation. This tendency is no accident: the terrain of Tibet is often inhospitable and travel through Tibet is not easy. Considering its countryside, wireless communications were and are an important means of communication. From the early days, radio was used for commercial and strategic purposes. Today, radio communications serve to inject new ideas and create an arena for critical thinking in a country with decidedly single-minded state media. These efforts are appreciated by some and questioned by others. Radio directed at Tibetans reflects the evolution of the Tibetan situation: although at first isolated with little experience in international relations, currently Tibetans as a whole find themselves in the middle of a tug-of-war between western and Chinese ideologies.

1. Robert Ford

The story of Tibetan radio can be said to begin with Robert Ford. As a sergeant instructor at an R.A.F. Radio School in Hyderabad in 1945, he had heard vague tales of Tibet's God-King, the Dalai Lama, and a kingdom in the sky. According to his autobiography, *Captured in Tibet*, he volunteered at a temporary posting in Lhasa in order to escape a quotidian life of nine-to-five-dom. Ford's first task was to relieve Reginald Fox, the radio officer at the British mission in Lhasa, who was to take a three month leave.

When Ford first arrived in Lhasa, the only two radio transmitters in Tibet were located at the British and Chinese missions. These stations were used for commercial purposes, relaying messages for traders across Tibet, but occasionally served strategic

purposes. During a rebellion by the monks at Sera Che, H. E. Richardson of the British mission was asked to allow Reginald Fox to help the army with radio communications (Goldstein 421). Tibetans strove to develop their own radio communications as part of their push to ramp up defenses and infrastructure in the years before 1950, when communist victory in China seemed immanent (Goldstein 620). Ford described how since the Tibetan's encounter with the Chinese from 1915-1917, "there was a great deal of suspicion [and] always the fear that the Chinese might come" (Strober and Strober 103). During World War II, the Tibetan administration had allowed two American officers passage through Tibet in search of a supply-line to China when the Burma Road was closed. As a token of gratitude, the President of the United States gave the Tibetans three complete radio stations. The Tibetan government asked Fox to train Tibetans to operate the stations; after relieving Fox, Ford continued training.

In keeping with Tibet's policy of seclusion, the administration insisted radio stations be run by Tibetans. It quickly became apparent, however, that few Tibetans were educated enough to become efficient radio operators. Training Tibetans was ultimately unsuccessful and the Tibetan government reluctantly agreed to bring in outside technicians. The first recruits were Indians, the feeling being that they were less foreign than Europeans. Robert Ford himself then applied to the Tibetan Government for employment (Ford 20).

To his own surprise, he was hired in 1948 and during his first year in Lhasa he built and opened Radio Lhasa. As Tibet's first radio broadcasting station, Radio Lhasa allowed Tibet to broadcast to the outside world for the first time in January 1950. At first the broadcast was only half an hour a day: the news was read in Tibetan by Rimshi Rasa

Gyagen, in Chinese by Phuntsok Tashi Takla, the Dalai Lama's brother-in-law, and in English by Reginald Fox. The primary purpose of these initial broadcasts was to counter Chinese propaganda declaring that Tibet was a part of China. The Tibetan struggle against Chinese assertions that Tibetan and Chinese identities were inextricable was slowly escalating, accompanied with increasing efforts towards improving military and communications capabilities.

Before radio communications in Tibet, couriers on horseback were the swiftest form of communication between various Tibetan provinces. To send a message from Lhasa to Chamdo, the district headquarters in Kham, took seven to ten days by horseback. Because Kham was the most likely starting point for Chinese aggression, it was chosen as the site for a second radio station. Ford then set out to open Kham's first radio station in Chamdo, the residence of the civil and military governor-general, Lhalu Shape. (Ford 22). Fox, who was living in India at the time, was then hired to take over Lhasa broadcasting. A third station was established in Nagchuka, the seat of the governor of Northern Tibet, and another possible Chinese invasion route.

Ford started his four Indian trainees on the full course he had been taught in the R.A.F. (trainees were Indian only in nationality; they were all of Tibetan or mixed Tibetan descent). This course included radio theory and operating technique. In order to prevent Indians from coming to Tibet for free tuition, the trainees signed on to five year contracts and had agreed to go anywhere in Tibet. Ford was eventually asked to expedite their training and the trainees were sent in pairs to strategic outposts on the Tibetan frontier.

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Figure 1: First two pages of wireless code used to relay messages. (See appendix A for photo sources)

In the early days of broadcasting from Chamdo, Ford communicated with Fox in Lhasa, relaying government messages (in a code neither of them knew) and commercial traffic published in a numerical code. After such traffic, Radio Lhasa broadcasted the news in Tibetan, English, and then Chinese. Ford relayed the broadcast to Sikang, Chinghai, and as much of China as his transmitter could reach. (Ford 23)

As one of the only Europeans in Tibet during the PLA's invasion of Tibet's frontier in 1950, Ford was particularly distressed by the message he heard from Radio Peking on May 22. "The tasks for the People's Liberation Army for 1950 are to liberate Tibet Taiwan, Hainan, and Tibet." Ford was not especially surprised; Radio Peking had made vague threats before and there were rumors that advance units of the PLA had reached the Upper Yangste River area, the boundary between Chinese and Tibetan controlled Kham (Ford 43). But Ford and the other European radio officials knew that Chinese invaders would be on the lookout for evidence of Western imperialism and that they would be targeted.

In July 1950, the first military contact between Tibet and China occurred at Dengko. Ford's trainees at the Dengko outpost sent urgent news to Chamdo through wireless radio (Chinese forces had attacked Dengko to destroy these communications). Robert Ford recalls the attack in his autobiography: "Sonam Phuntso [the wireless operator in Dengko] told me he had an urgent message as soon as he came on the air. He began to tap it out, but he did not finish. Suddenly he broke off, and telegraphed in clear: 'The Chinese are here.' Then there was silence. Dengko radio had closed down for good." One of the two radio operators managed to evade Chinese capture and arrived at

Chamdo a week later. Sonam Phunsto informed Ford that the other operator, Sonam Dorje, had stayed behind to tap out his final message to Chamdo. Ford immediately reported to Lhalu, the governor general of Kham. Lhalu informed Lhasa of the attack and asked for more wireless equipment and operators. The attack at Dengko highlighted the importance of Tibet's rudimentary wireless network: had there not been a station at Dengko, no one would be aware that PLA troops were moving into Kham.

In the tense days that followed, Ford was frustrated and confused by the refusal of Tibetan officials to radio the outside world about the attack and ask for aid:

“I was still relaying the transmissions, and I had listened to every news-bulletin and talk that had been broadcast. I had still not heard a single reply to Peking. No one had said that Tibet did not want to be liberated. There had not even been a denial that Tibet was controlled by American and British imperialists” (Ford 86).

Lhalu tried to assuage Ford and explained that Tibet didn't want to provoke Beijing and would resort to military action if necessary. Ford countered that if Tibet waited until a Chinese invasion was completely underway, it would be too late to ask for help from U.S. or U.N. forces.

Ford was even more distressed to find that Lhalu had been called back to Lhasa and was to be replaced by Ngabö. Ngabö's attitude differed from Lhalu's: where Lhalu was prepared to defend Kham militarily, Ngabö reportedly commented that Tibet could not fight against the Chinese Communists because the Chinese had more experienced soldiers and more advanced weaponry (Goldstein 622). Ford later admitted that the Tibetans did have very little in the way of an army and that this army was not well equipped or well organized (Strober and Strober 92). However, he appreciated Lhalu's fighting spirit and was agitated by Ngabö's decision to remove some of the defensive

measures Lhalu had put in place. Furthermore, of the two portable wireless sets Ngabö had brought from Lhasa (Lhalu had repeatedly requested these after the fall of Dengko and destruction of wireless communications there), Ngabö decided not to install either along the border. One was to return with Lhalu to Lhasa, while Ngabö had the other station remain in Chamdo as a spare and told Ford to keep it ready to be sent out. Ford urged Ngabö to send the spare set to Riwoche, an important point on their escape route to Lhasa and the village where they would ultimately be cut off by Chinese forces advancing to the capital (Goldstein 689).¹

But Ngabö refused to send out the spare radio station, and after a month of conflicting reports regarding the Chinese position, a messenger from Riwoche arrived on the 16th of October and reported that the Chinese were fast approaching. If Ford and company remained in Chamdo any longer their escape route to Lhasa would be cut off. Ngabö wired Lhasa and asked for permission to retreat (Ford contended later that Ngabö asked Lhasa for permission to surrender to the Chinese and was denied). Hasty and panicked preparation was made to leave immediately and it was decided that Chamdo was to be evacuated on the eighteenth. Ford awoke on the morning of the eighteenth to find that Ngabö and all the other Lhasa officials had left without him or his radio operators. Ford ran to the governor's Residency and found it completely empty. After arranging for the destruction of his radio equipment and transport for his radio operators, Ford set out to catch Ngabö and company.

Fleeing on horseback, he eventually overtook Ngabö at the village Lamda. There, a messenger from Riwoche arrived to report that the Chinese attack had begun. As Ford

¹ See appendix B for relevant maps.

and the others from Chamdo reached the foot of the Lagong pass, another messenger reported that Riwoche had fallen. From here they would have to race Chinese forces before they were cut off at the crossroads.



Figure 2: Tibetan Military circa 1950 Chinese Invasion

However, it soon became clear that the fleeing Tibetans could not escape the quickly advancing Chinese soldiers. Despite Ford's objections, Ngabö ordered his officials and the recently arrived reinforcements to surrender and fall back to a nearby monastery. Ford, along with others, was captured by Chinese forces. He was questioned extensively about his activities as a British spy. Ford informed his interrogators that he was employed by the Tibetan government and not the British government. But invading Chinese forces needed evidence of Western imperialism, and they found Ford's

biography unsatisfactory. He passed from interrogator to interrogator and was eventually imprisoned in a Chinese re-education camp. Ford underwent the rigors of communist brainwashing, and describes in his biography his ever-changing cast of Chinese cellmates. Radio was still a part of his routine. Loudspeakers outside one of his cells relayed news and bulletins from Radio Chungking. Ford wrote of one occasion when he and his cellmate Kang, a former Kuomintang officer, heard the news in Tibetan. The broadcast was read by a woman with a good Lhasa accent. Ford was astonished to see Kang crying after the broadcast. Ford and other prisoners were required to keep close tabs on the activities of their cellmates:

“‘Why are you crying?’ I asked; not out of sympathy or pity, but because it was my duty to ask.

‘I was thinking of my parents,’ he said, ‘and how badly I have treated them by supporting a corrupt reactionary regime.’

I knew that was not the truth, but it was some time later that I learnt that the Tibetan newsreader was Kang’s wife” (Ford 225).

After five grueling years of re-education, Ford finally was released in May 1955. He was reunited with his parents at Heathrow airport and is widely considered an important source of information on pre-invasion era Tibetan history.

2. Transfer of Radio into Chinese hands

Chinese invaders appropriated Tibet’s nascent radio network and developed it further. Chinese authorities established a new radio station at Phari on December 19th, 1951 as a key link in radio networking in southern Tibet. On April 11th 1952, Ford’s Indian trainees were sent out of the country and returned to Sikkim and India (Tashi Tsering, interview). Maintenance and operation of the six permanent radio stations and two mobile stations fell to Chinese personnel. With the ratification of the 17 Point

Agreement in 1959, Chinese officials in Tibet were recognized as a central power, not merely invaders. Tibetan's were no longer allowed a military or communications network of their own. Slowly radio infrastructure continued expansion within Tibet although expanding radio communications were not intended to foster connections to the non-Communist world (in 1962, Chinese severed radio communications between the Indian Consulate General in Lhasa and India, which had been the only radio link between Tibet and the outside world). Tibetan radio from this point on served Chinese state interests.

3. Shortwave Radio and Radio Jamming

In response to single-minded state media, a number of foreign broadcasters have attempted to broadcast into Tibet and provide alternative viewpoints. Most of the radio directed at Tibet is shortwave format. Shortwave radio (AM radio) is the chosen medium as it is relatively easy to target a large area with one transmission. Most shortwave broadcasting is transmitted through skywave transmissions. An antenna is used to transmit by converting energy into an electromagnetic wave. These waves reach a layer of the upper atmosphere called the ionosphere and are reflected downwards. The shortwave signals spread and reach the ground hundreds or possibly thousands of miles from the transmission site. After reaching the earth, signals will again be reflected towards the ionosphere and bounce back to earth again, although the signal will be weaker (Alme and Vagen 99).

It is also possible to broadcast using groundwave transmissions. With groundwave transmission, a signal is beamed directly towards the ground. Groundwave

signals can travel around 2-5 miles, depending on the topography surrounding the transmission site. Shortwave radios intercept groundwave and skywave signals and induce a voltage from them. The receiving radio then converts and amplifies the signals back into the original sound (Alme and Vagen 100).

A discussion of foreign broadcasting into Tibet requires an understanding of the term “jamming.” Jamming is the intentional transmission of radio signals in order to interfere with signals from another station (Alme and Vagen 101). A transmitter tuned to the same frequency as another transmitter can, with enough power, override the other signal. Often, Chinese jammers simply air ordinary Chinese radio programs over unwanted foreign transmissions (Alme and Vagen 100). As opposed to “subtle” jamming, which cannot be heard on the receiving end, this type of jamming is referred to as “obvious,” as it is heard by the receiver and simply drowns out the undesired broadcast.

4. Exile Radio: VoT

Today, a number of stations exist outside of Tibet that strive to provide those in Tibet with an alternative to state media. Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and Voice of Tibet have been the most successful in broadcasting into Tibet and to the Tibetan exile community. Of these three radio stations, RFA and VoA are funded by the U.S. government, while VoT is based in Norway. Voice of Tibet was registered as a foundation in Oslo, Norway in 1995. VoT was founded by a number of NGOs based in Oslo, including the Norwegian Human Rights House, the Norwegian Tibet Committee, and Worldview Rights. With the help of donations from private individuals and the

Norwegian Law Students Humanitarian Campaign, in 1996 VoT was able to go on air for the first time. Three Tibetan journalists (one for each of the three main dialects, U-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo dialects) had been recruited and sent for training in journalism in Dharamsala and India. VoT's first broadcast on May 14, 1996 was a 15 minutes news program broadcast through a transmitter site on the Seychelles islands, northeast of Madagascar. It was rebroadcast Monday through Friday. About a month into VoT's broadcasting schedule, the Chinese began jamming transmissions. In response, VoT shifted its frequency. In the early days of Chinese jamming, it took jammers around a week to move jamming transmitters to the new frequency (today it takes seconds). In the meantime, VoT was afforded another week of unjammed broadcasts. It was not long before China took decisive action: on September 13, 1996, Oystein Alme, the director of VoT, received a phone call from the Seychelles transmitter site. Chinese authorities had informed Seychelles that all their broadcasts would be jammed unless they agreed to stop broadcasting for Voice of Tibet. After negotiation the director of the Seychelles site promised Alme to continue broadcasts for one month, allowing VoT time to find an alternative transmitter site. After hundreds of phone calls and months of searching, a new site was contracted on January 1st 1997. The new site could only offer 500 kW packages as opposed to 100 kW VoT had been broadcasting on at Seychelles. This new deal was a strain on VoT's already tight budget, but after negotiating down the kilowatts and price, VoT was able to continue broadcasts (Alme and Vagen 17).

In December 1999, VoT introduced 15 minutes of news services in Mandarin Chinese, in keeping with the Dalai Lama's assertion that the people of China require unbiased news and alternative views just as Tibetans do. The new fifteen-minute service

followed VoT's half hour Tibetan programming. Besides reaching out to potential Chinese listeners, the Mandarin section is also useful for listeners in Kham and Amdo who have trouble understanding the Uke dialect used in the Tibetan broadcast. VoT has received positive feedback from Chinese students studying in Beijing regarding their Mandarin program. Eventually the main office was moved from Oslo to Dharamsala due to budget concerns and also to provide reporters with better resources for reporting on Tibetan news. At first VoT was overseen by the Department of Information and International Relations, but the station became autonomous in 1996 to allow reporters room for more unbiased reporting (Paldon interview).



Figure 3: VoT Insignia found on the inner wall of the VoT recording studio in Dharamsala.

Unlike VoA and RFA, VoT doesn't cover international news, but only reports

stories related to Tibet (one reason for this limited scope is the short length of the program). In general, VoT's programming follows His Holiness, developments in Tibet, and activities in the exile community, including peace movements and protests. The Tibetan and Mandarin sections of the broadcast are essentially the same in content. The Tibetan broadcast includes twenty minutes of news stories, while the last ten minutes focuses on a fixed feature for each day of the week.

VoT Feature Segments

<i>Monday</i>	Tibetan History
<i>Tuesday</i>	Music
<i>Wednesday</i>	His Holiness's speeches, serialized
<i>Thursday</i>	Health
<i>Friday</i>	Diaspora concerns (may include interviews with settlement officers or Tibetan institutions)
<i>Saturday</i>	His Holiness's religious teachings
<i>Sunday</i>	Panel discussion and listeners forum (listeners may email in with specific topic requests)

Reporting on events happening in Tibet proves difficult for VoT. News is collected using a number of methods. A correspondent in Nepal meets and interviews newly arrived Tibetans at the reception center in Kathmandu. A few people in Dharamsala and India have contacts in Tibet and sometimes call or use the Internet to communicate with friends or relatives for second hand information. Apart from interviewing contacts and new arrivals, VoT reporters try to corroborate interviews with information from other people in the area or with reports from organizations involved in

or concerned with a particular event.

According to Tenzin Paldon, assistant director of the VoT office in Dharamsala, jamming continues, although in the case of VoT Chinese jammers often use loud drums, opera, and screeching noises to drown out their broadcasts. In order to counter jamming, programs are rebroadcast 5 times a day and VoT may shift frequencies during a broadcast (Tenzin explained that because most Tibetans use analog radios, they can simply retune to the next frequency).

The broadcast is recorded and edited in the VoT office in Dharamsala according to a daily routine. In the morning, VoT holds an editorial meeting. Like most modern news followers, their main source of stories and leads is the internet, and much of the morning is spent translating reports into Tibetan, checking the VoT server for news from



Figure 4: VoT Editor records and mixes daily broadcast. The mixer is flanked by old analog equipment, now kept as a back-up.

correspondents, and keeping up with daily headlines. A follow up meeting decides what news should come first in the broadcast, what tasks should be allocated to whom, and to organize excursions into Dharamsala or telephone interviews when necessary. Staff members then go out into the field to record sound bytes and interviews and formulate individual news stories. In the afternoon from 2-3 o'clock, VoT staff record their findings. Where before, fickle analog equipment was used to produce a broadcast, VoT recently switched entirely to digital equipment (although the old analog equipment is kept in the recording studio out of sentimentality and in case back-up is needed). VoT boasts a fluid personnel structure; although there are official reporters, editors, and administrators, tasks are split evenly and everyone takes part in reporting, editing, and translating (Paldon interview).

After determining specific slots for each news story and determining which stories should come first (a South Indian report on a religious ceremony had top billing at the time of the interview), the program is edited and uploaded to VoT's server. From the server, the broadcast is received by the transmitter sites and broadcasted into Tibet and China. Each broadcast is also uploaded to VoT's website and is available for download. Listeners from outside broadcast range can download shows. Other listeners in China



Figure 5: VoT reporter in the field.

can occasionally access online broadcasts using proxy servers to bypass Chinese Internet censors. VoT broadcasts from several locations, although Tenzin could not reveal the sites of transmitters. In its thirteen-year history, Voice of Tibet has

constantly struggled with budget issues and steadily increasing Chinese jamming. However, Tenzin maintains that the effort is worth the satisfaction of serving Tibet. Born in India, Tenzin has never been to Tibet but likes to imagine her voice and her work being transmitted throughout her mother country.

5. Exile Radio: BBG

Radio Free Asia and Voice of America are overseen by the BBG, or Broadcasting Board of Governors. This U.S. institution was founded to oversee taxpayer-funded broadcasting abroad. This broadcasting takes two forms: general broadcasting is carried out by VoA and Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa and strives to provide reliable international news and accounts of U.S. policy to areas whose governments may impede free flow of information. The other type of broadcasting, surrogate broadcasting, includes Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, and Radio and TV Marti (BBG fact sheet).

These stations emphasize news pertaining to the targeted country, as opposed to international news, that may be eschewed by indigenous media. BBG broadcasters aim to gain the trust of people living under authoritarian governments by bypassing state information. Rather than serve U.S. foreign relations interests by dealing directly with foreign governments, these radio stations target the minds of the people (Kirscten).

BBG operational units include the VoA and Office of Cuba Broadcasting (which includes Radio and TV Marti). It is headed by a bipartisan board comprised of nine members; eight members are appointed by the president and confirmed by the senate. The Secretary of State serves as the ninth member. Besides dispensing federal grants for RFA and RFE/RL, the BBG's main function is to insulate U.S. broadcasting abroad from

politics. In 1998, during a reorganization of foreign affairs offices, lawmakers insisted that the BBG be granted independence. Authors of the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 argued that radio journalists should be shielded from the interests of the State Department, and that broadcasting abroad should not be perceived as simply a megaphone for U.S. policy. The BBG became an autonomous institution in October 1999 and was authorized to make grants available to surrogate broadcasting services. The BBG thus affords the U.S. Government with deniability, as foreign broadcasting in authoritarian countries is usually not well received by the home government.

U.S. surrogate broadcasting in Asia first gained momentum during the Korean War. Later, interest resurged during the Vietnam War. This current wave of interest re-emerged after the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests in 1989. In 1994 under the International Broadcasting Act, Congress provided startup funds for RFA and brought all abroad radio stations under the direction of BBG in order to avoid overlap in broadcasting and better coordinate efforts. The bill, besides stipulating the start-up budget of RFA, indicated that RFA would assume all obligations, not the U.S. government (Epstein). RFA was formally founded in 1996 under the stipulations of the 1994 International Broadcasting Act.

6. Exile Radio: RFA

Radio Free Asia went on air for the first time on September 29, 1996, broadcasting into China in Mandarin for one hour at 7 a.m. The show was rebroadcast again at 11:00 p.m. The Chinese government reacted predictably: it sent strongly worded



Figure 6: Politcal cartoon from the China Daily on January 25, 1997. RFA is depicted as "the man with the long tongue." The text going into the head reads, "rumors, twist, and slant." Around the microphone reads "Radio Free Asia."

letters of opposition to top U.S. government officials and some Chinese newspapers claimed the broadcasts where part of a plot by the C.I.A. One year later, RFA was broadcasting 17 hours into Asia in all the languages mandated by Congress. Chinese opposition continued, as Chinese officials asserted that the U.S. was using freedom of speech as an excuse to interfere in Asian country's internal affairs and to impose American values on other nations. The Chinese administration had made this complaint before in reference to foreign broadcasting, but it now took more aggressive measures to counter broadcasting. China began jamming all RFA

Mandarin broadcasts in most frequencies on August 18, 1997. Tibetan broadcasts were jammed in early October 1997. RFA began broadcasting from multiple transmission sites and on varied frequencies, which averted some jamming (Epstein). However, Chinese efforts have kept up with broadcasting advances. Callers from Lhasa have reported to RFA and other stations that programs are currently jammed all over the country and especially in cities. Some report that in cities, the Chinese have constructed up to four towers specifically for jamming foreign broadcasts, although the Chinese have explained that these towers were installed for protection against lightening hazards (RFA Listener Comments).

RFA currently broadcasts in nine languages:

RFA Language Break -Down

9 Language Services

Mandarin (Launched 9/96) 12 hours of programming per day, 7 days a week
One and one half additional hours weekly in the Wu (Shanghai) dialect.

Tibetan 3 dialects - 10 hours of programming per day, 7 days a week
Uke dialect (Launched 12/96), Kham dialect (5/97), Amdo dialect (5/97) *

Burmese (Launched 2/97) 4 hours per day, 7 days a week *

Korean (Launched 3/97) 5 hours per day to North Korea, 7 days a week

Vietnamese (Launched 2/97) 2 hours per day, 7 days a week

Laotian (Launched 8/97) 2 hours per day, 7 days a week

Khmer (Cambodian) (Launched 9/97) 2 hours per day, 7 days a week

Cantonese (Launched 5/98) 2 hours per day, 7 days a week

Uyghur (Launched 12/98) 2 hours per day, 7 days a week

The RFA Tibetan programming is recorded in the RFA stringer office in Dharamsala. Here, reporters have access to the exile government and are better able to cover the activities of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The three reporters (one for each of the three main Tibetan dialects) are paid per story and are not on salary (Dhonyoe interview). Lobe, the reporter for the Amdo dialect, explained that this payment method provides a strong incentive to produce a good story. The stories are recorded in the field; reporters then return to the studio for editing. A rough cut of the story is sent to RFA headquarters in Washington D.C. where the final cut is made. Lobe had always been interested in reporting, and first worked in news as a translator in Delhi, where most of the news is conducted in English. Later he moved to Dharamsala, and while working at

Moon Peak Café established the Tibetan Social Forum which, like most small independent newspapers, was eventually defunct due to scanty budget. But Lobe prefers radio reporting to newspaper reporting, as it can reach a wider audience. Lobe asserted that radio is more useful to more people, referring to the large number of ethnic Tibetans in China who are uneducated and illiterate (Lobe interview).

When setting out to report a story, Lobe prefers not to have a plan, so as not to impose his own idea of the story on reality. “It is best,” he said, “to just go to the site and see what happens. There, I observe, interview, and assess what is going on.”

Interviewees are often not as aware of time limit as Lobe would like them to be; Lobe’s slot for Amdo dialect news is short and he does not have time for the unrelated stories and longwinded answers that often accompany his interviews. Lobe demonstrated with his hands that he often has to dig through responses, brushing aside the extraneous, to extract the core point of an interview. Reporting on events happening in Tibet presents its own set of difficulties. Reporters rely on contacts with friends and relatives inside Tibet and must extrapolate the full story from the meager information received from inside Tibet. Phone calls over landlines are too easily tracked; RFA reporters often rely on Internet phone services, such as Skype. Lobe even said that he had attended a seminar held by an American man on technologies that could be used to bypass Chinese censorship and get information out of Tibet (he shied away from discussing specific techniques). Although difficult, the struggle for news from Tibet is imperative in order to provide high quality reporting. “Sound bytes from Tibet are extremely important,” Lobe insisted. “They prove that the story is real.”

7. Exile Radio: VoA

Voice of America has long been broadcasting into foreign nations and currently boasts programming in 53 languages on radio, TV, and internet around the world. Ganden Tashi, a former political prisoner, is especially familiar with VoA broadcasts. As a monk, Tashi took part in a 1989 protest, coinciding with the anniversary of March 1959's peaceful uprising. The protest turned violent and Tashi, along with many others, was arrested and sentenced to time in T.A.R. Prison #1. The prisoners were classified as either criminal or political prisoners. As a political prisoner, Tashi was only allowed state newspapers as a source of media (which Tashi was forced to pour over and internalize). These newspapers only aggrandized the Chinese Communist party and never mentioned Tibet or Tibetan issues.

Tashi's isolation from the outside world eventually ended when one of his cellmates came into possession of a shortwave radio. Political prisoners were kept isolated. Criminal prisoners were less threatening to the Chinese administration and were allowed more personal liberties, such as radio. Thus, a political prisoner with the right connections could barter for radio or other contraband. Tashi recalls how occasionally, political and criminal prisoners would interact briefly in the prison hospital, workplaces, or the prison yard. Tashi's radio in particular was dropped off surreptitiously in a bush and later picked up by one of his cellmates. Prisoners had to be equally careful about replacing batteries, which reached the prison through a web of connections through criminal prisoners into the outside world. Because the radio had no earphones and cellmates were constantly observed, a prison guard would have noticed immediately if prisoners were gathered around a blaring radio. As a solution, one cellmate would turn

on the radio very quietly and hold it up to his ear, while others kept watch around corners using mirrors held through their prison bars. Whoever was in charge of listening had to remember what was reported in order to pass the information onto other cellmates. These cellmates in turn passed news along to prisoners in other cells without radio.

Hiding the radio was tricky. Prison guards routinely searched each cell with metal detectors. One of Tashi's large bedposts was hollowed out and used for storage. When they got the opportunity, the inmates listened to BBC's Chinese Problem segment (Tashi found BBC reports were often off the mark). However, they listened mostly to VoA's two hours of Tibetan programming.

Before World War II, all shortwave broadcasting was in private hands. VoA broadcasts began in January of 1942 when the U.S. government began leasing 15-minute blocks of time on a number of private shortwave stations, calling the program the "Voice of America." The first Voice of America broadcast was in Germany on February 24, 1942, seventy-nine days after the United States entered World War II. "Daily at this time, we shall speak to you about America and the war. The news may be good or bad. We shall tell you the truth," said the announcer. Eventually VoA was organized under the Office of War Information. Now over sixty years later, the VoA reports to the BBG. (VoA fact sheet). VoA programming boasts over 1,500 hours of programming in over fifty-three languages (VoA homepage).

Tibetan broadcasting at VoA was originally the brainchild of John Buescher, a Tibetan studies scholar at the National Endowment for the Humanities. His search for educated Tibetans living in the U.S. with journalistic or broadcasting backgrounds and knowledge of English was not easy. Eventually four suitable candidates were found and

hired, including “a diamond sorter, a man who hand-sewed camera bags, a lathe operator, and a highly educated journalist who had been working in the Office of Tibet in New York City” (Heil 303). The fledgling crew began training in late 1990. Buescher and executive producer Hal Swaney judged they would be ready for their first real broadcast on March 31, 1991. However, upon discovering that the U.S. ambassador to Beijing had a visit to Lhasa scheduled for the 31st, the VoA Tibetan staff felt that launching the West’s first Tibetan programming that day might seem overly provocative. The broadcast was pushed up a week. The first fifteen-minute program was broadcast on March 25, 1991, to Brazil. Buescher recalled the moment ten years later, commenting: “it’s a reminder that, all things aside, radio is a very human and fallible enterprise, just as, no matter how much fancy technology you have, the broadcasts are still, and always will be, on mind and one voice at a time in front of a microphone here connecting with one pair of ears and one mind at a time on the high plains of Tibet” (Heil 304).

Tibetan broadcasting proceeded under Buescher, eventually joined by RFA and VoT programming, until leadership of Tibetan services was passed to Lobsang Gyatso on May 8, 2007 (International Campaign for Tibet). VoA is currently facing budget cuts, including a reduction of Tibetan and English broadcasting, and a push to transfer programming to newer media such as Internet and FM radio. Former VoA board members have protested the \$26 million in proposed cuts, arguing that the newly appropriated funds will not be sufficient to fund transitions to newer media and that the programs to be cut are still valuable (Francis). The proposed cuts have also sparked protests among Tibetan activists. A contingent of Tibetan monks visited Capital Hill to lobby for continued Tibetan broadcasting, indicating a continued appreciation for the

broadcasts (Keil). The future of VoA Tibetan broadcasting is unsure and may not survive VoA's goal to incorporate new media and may eventually be pushed out by expanding broadcast services to the Middle East. However, the programming is clearly appreciated by those in Tibet; this appreciation necessitates continuation of some form of communication with Tibetans in China.

8. Detractors and Proponents of U.S. Foreign Broadcasting

Foreign governments are not alone in their complaints about U.S. broadcasting into nations perceived to have dearth of free or unbiased information. Many detractors argue that foreign broadcasting served out its usefulness in the Cold War and that in the new media-rich environment, competition from satellite television and radio and Internet podcasts means that BBG surrogate stations are struggling to maintain a loyal audience (Kaminski). Particularly in the case of China and Radio Free Asia, detractors in the U.S. argue that China is a much more open society than Europe and the Soviet Union had been in the 1950s when Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was established. Some argue that surrogate broadcasting into China is too aggressive, and that Asian governments will react by tightening their grip on information flow and will move further away from democratic principles (Epstein). Indeed foreign broadcasting has added to paranoia and determination among Chinese media outlets to present only the party line. Appealing to the citizens of a nation while alienating leadership may ultimately harm Sino-American relations.

Other detractors assert that foreign broadcasting into China is employed as a cop out, as economic pressure or political pressure could directly harm U.S. interests. U.S.

foreign broadcasting has been interpreted as imposing U.S. values on the minds of citizens while displaying reluctance to take decisive action when it comes to protecting human rights abroad.

Jeffrey Gedmin, President of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, argues for the continuing and increasing relevance of radio and surrogate broadcasting into regions with oppressive governments. Regardless of motives, U.S. foreign broadcasting is more often than not well received by citizens of authoritarian nations. Recently escaped Tibetan refugees have reported a high degree of appreciation for foreign broadcasts. RFE/RL is the most popular station in Afghanistan, a country in which radio is the main source of information. Recent changes in leadership among BBG radio services have resulted in a push to incorporate cell-phone texting and Internet, indicating that radio can keep up with and incorporate news from new technologies (Kaminski). Shortwave radio is popular in less-developed nations without widespread access to these new technologies and has made successful efforts to synchronize with new media.

Relevance aside, some are ideologically opposed to interfering with foreign countries using broadcasting charged with U.S. values and interests. Although the BBG provides journalists with the freedom to report stories as they find fit without answering to the State Department, it is impossible to deny the connection between BBG broadcasting services and the U.S. government. Historically, the State Department has exerted pressure on VoA reporters to exclude or delay certain reports that may negatively affect U.S. foreign policy. In late September 2001, VoA aired a report containing excerpts from an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Omar Mohammad, among other interviews and commentaries. State Department officials pushed to have the program

taken off the air, arguing that it gave terrorists a platform to express their views (Mullah Omar, Interview). VoA dodged complaints in this case and has skirted other pressures in the past by appealing to journalistic purity (Sheckler). However, the fact remains that foreign broadcasters find themselves justifying their reporting to a U.S. government agency, indicating a degree of responsibility to the State Department. Decisions regarding which countries to broadcast to are strategic decisions; broadcasting is ultimately meant to serve U.S. interests.

Gedmin responds to these criticisms by arguing for the efficacy of foreign broadcasting from a political perspective. The Obama administration stresses “soft power.” U.S. military officials and diplomats talk of a “political surge” to complement the military surge in Afghanistan. Qualifying successful foreign relations no longer emphasizes enemy body counts and military victories, but rather relationships built and capital spent on development and reconstruction. In this new age of soft power, radio broadcasting stands as one of the most cost-effective and well-received methods of further U.S. foreign interests (Gedmin).

Ultimately, U.S. foreign broadcasting injects new ideas and engenders critical thinking among societies where dialogue is discouraged. Efforts by authoritarian governments to jam broadcasts only highlight its importance. History has shown that when a population is given the choice, it will choose decent, accountable government and open dialogue over suppressive government and one-sided state information. BBG services provide an arena for the development such a society in countries where no place for discussion exists.

9. Question of Imposing Foreign Values on China

Foreign broadcasting has been criticized as interfering with the values of another state. American and European broadcasters into China are seen as imposing Western values on a nation that is economically successful and more democratic and open than the Soviet Union had been at the outset of foreign broadcasting there. Critics argue that foreign broadcasting into China is a waste of money: broadcasts are often effectively jammed by Chinese authorities and a few hours of programming a day cannot compete with China's massive state news agency, Xinhua. Despite these and other criticisms, the fact remains that Tibetans and Chinese in China are not afforded the basic freedoms owed to them by the Chinese administration. These freedoms are not imagined by westerners hung up on the power of democracy and the individual. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted unanimously by the U.N. General Assembly in 1948, obliges China and other nations to uphold a variety of personal rights. Article 19 propounds the right to freedom of opinion: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers" (U.N. Document). Chinese state media has striven to present and impart one viewpoint: the viewpoint of the state.

10. Conclusion

U.S. funded exile radio has an agenda. Although broadcasters are insulated, BBG stations were still founded for strategic purposes. VoT may have less of an agenda, but is still interfering with the state policy of another country. Broadcasting funded by another

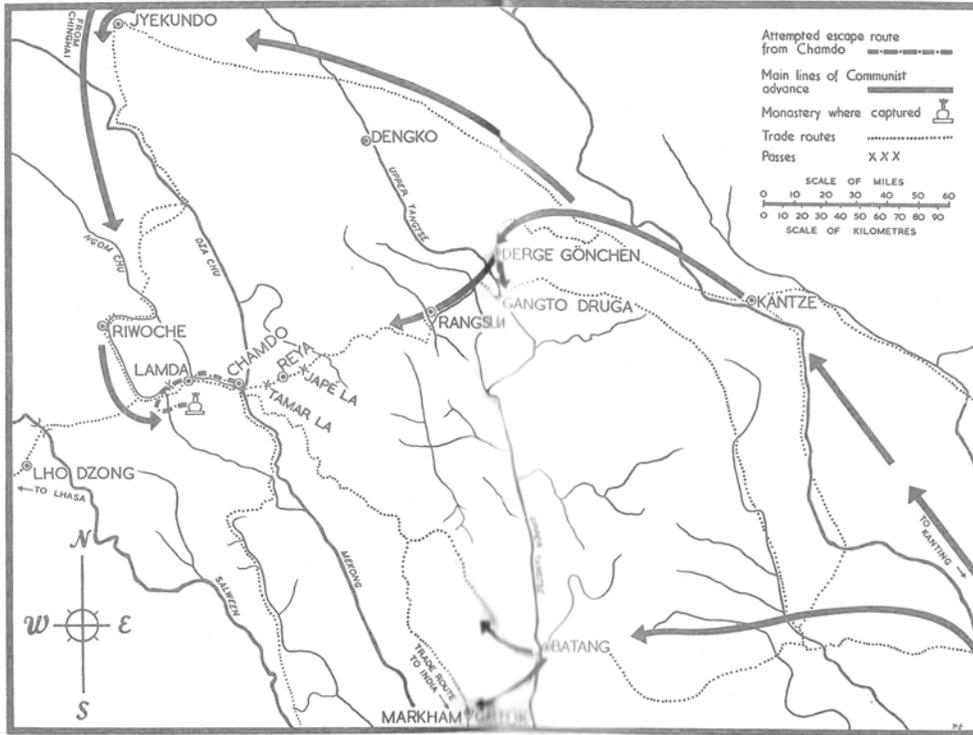
nation must also serve the nation footing the bill. Tibetans find themselves in the middle of an information war with westerners working to contrast Chinese state media and win over supporters. Each side represents a political and social ideology.

However, despite the foibles of foreign broadcasters, they are still an alternative to decidedly single-minded state media in China. As an authoritarian government, Chinese administration seeks not only to direct political and economic development, but also seeks to mold the ideological state of its population to match the interests of the state. In the case of a country as large and pluralistic as China, efforts to exact this goal will only harm the population. In the case of Tibetans in China, not since Robert Ford has indigenous media or radio served their interests. Citizens' desire to seek alternative viewpoints is stymied by the administration. If Chinese leadership will not foster a free flow of information as it is obligated to allow, then it should come as no surprise that others will try and fill this important niche.

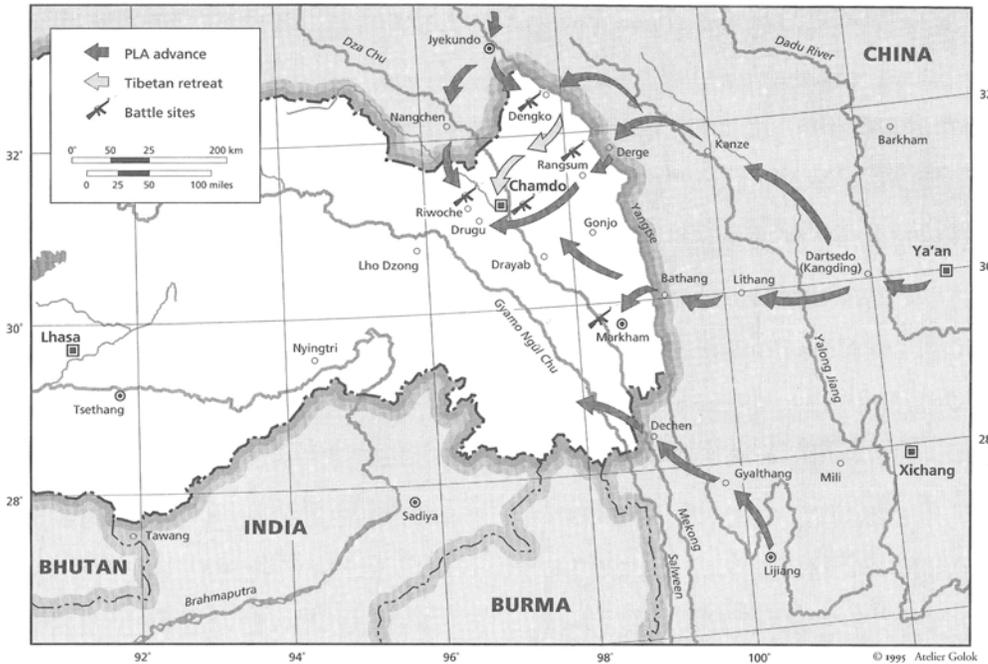
Appendix A: Photo Sources

1. **Cover Photo:** Harrer, Heinrich. Tibet: Zeitdokumente Aus den Jahren 1944-1951. Zurich: OZV Offizin, 1991.
2. **Figure 1:** Tibetan Wireless Code Manual. New Delhi: Sambhota Publications, 1985.
3. **Figure 2:** Harrer, Heinrich. Tibet: Zeitdokumente Aus den Jahren 1944-1951. Zurich: OZV Offizin, 1991.
4. **Figure 3:** photo by author
5. **Figure 4:** photo by author
6. **Figure 5:** photo courtesy of Oystein Alme, director of VoT
7. **Figure 6:** "The Man with the Long Tongue." China Daily [Beijing] 25 Jan. 1997.

Appendix B: Maps Pertaining to R. Ford's Flight



People's Liberation Army invasion of Tibet
(October 1950)



Top: Ford, Robert. Captured in Tibet. New York: Oxford UP, 1990. Print.

Bottom: Shakya., Tsering. The Dragon in the Land of Snows A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947. New York: Penguin (Non-Classics), 2000. Print.

Appendix C: Methodology and Acknowledgements

Methodology

Because very few comprehensive studies exist on early Tibetan radio, my discussion of Robert Ford is pieced together from Ford's biography and various general histories of Tibet. Likewise, little literature has been written on the logistics and history of specific stations and programming, so these sections depended on interviews with administrative personnel and U.S. Government documents concerned with foreign broadcasting. Because U.S. funded broadcasting into southern Asia is controversial, both in America and China, I depended on discussions in articles regarding the merits and faults of U.S. broadcasting.

Acknowledgments

Producing several hours of broadcasting a day is taxing on one's schedule. Personnel at Radio Free Asia and Voice of Tibet were kind enough to put aside time to discuss the ins and outs of their respective stations. They were very helpful when it came to suggesting other contacts. Tashi Tsering of the Amnye Machen Institute likewise was very willing to discuss my project and spared no effort in finding contacts and photographs relevant to my paper.

Appendix D: Suggestions for Further Research

1. Although the Tibetan programming of All India Radio is no longer especially popular, from the 1950s until the 1980s, many top Tibetan scholars were working or reporting for AIR. Due to time limitations, I focused on programming still popular today, but a true history of Tibetan radio should certainly include a discussion of AIR Tibetan programming.
2. Use of radio after the 17 Point Agreement, when China was acknowledged as a central power in Tibet and thus Tibetans were no longer allowed independent media, would be interesting and relevant. I focused on radio used by or directed at Tibetans, but how Chinese occupants in Tibet used radio is grounds for further study.
3. Current policy regarding radio in Tibet/China also deserves further attention. Perhaps a comparison could be done between radio policy in the T.A.R. where ostensibly a degree of autonomy is allowed and policy in other ethnically Tibetan provinces in China.

Appendix E: Tibetan Words and Spelling

English Transliteration	Tibetan Translation
Amdo	a mdo
Chamdo	chab mdo
Dengko	ldan khog
Dhonyoe	
Ganden Tashi	dga' ldan bkra shis
Kham	khams
Lagong	la gong
Lamda	lam mda'
Lhalu Shape	lha klu zhabs pad
Lhasa	lha sa
Lobe	blo be
Nagchuka	nag chu kha
Ngabö	nga bod
Phuntsok Tashi Takla	phun tshogs bkra shis
Rimshi Rasa Gyagen	rim bshi ra tsha rgya rgan
Riwoche	ri bo che
Sera Che	se ra byes
Sonam Dorje	bsod names rdo rje
Sonam Phunsto	bsod names phun tshogs
Tashi Tsering	bkra shis tshe ring
Tenzin Paldon	bstan 'dzin

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