CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PROOF OF TIBET’S ENDURING INDEPENDENCE
TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION

When the Dalai Lama returned to Lhasa early in 1913, he set out in a purposeful fashion to consolidate Tibet’s claims to independence. With the Qing Dynasty in ruins, he saw to it that the Chinese people who remained in the country were expelled. He also issued a proclamation that Shakabpa styles “a special official declaration of Tibet’s freedom and independence.” In that document, the Dalai Lama gives voice to the leit motif of Shakabpa’s entire narrative, the notion that:

Previously, the preceptor-patron relationship has been enjoyed since the time of the Mongolians Genghis Khan, Alten Khan, and so forth, through the series of Chinese kingdoms, the Ming Dynasty and so forth, and up to the Manchu Dynasty, which developed a preceptor-patron relationship with the great fifth Dalai Lama. Each side would protect the other.

The Dalai Lama goes on to observe that recently some Chinese functionaries “out of avarice, have ceaselessly worked to intimidate and terrorize us out of our land.” He endeavors to present the Chinese interference in Tibetan affairs as the idiosyncratic behavior of a few stray figures, including corrupt ministers and regional leaders that violated traditional norms, forcing the Dalai Lama to go into exile. He then offered a series of reforms, urging a renewal of Buddhism, a revitalization of ethical government, and the embrace of modernization.

In the wake of his far-flung travels, the Dalai Lama realized how important it was for Tibet’s future to remain involved with other nations. His personal experience had inspired him to reverse Tibet’s customary isolationist policy. He began to promote contacts with other countries. A number of intelligent young men, for example, were sent to England to be educated at Rugby. He also formulated a treaty with

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a See p. 759 ff. below.
Mongolia in 1913. Lhasa also maintained relations with Japan, gaining critical military advice. At the same time, Tibetan relations with Britain deepened.

China, at last independent of their Manchurian overlords, attempted to assume for themselves the claims to Tibet that had long been made by the Manchurians. Tibet resisted these claims, in part by appealing to British intermediaries. Ultimately, a tripartite conference between China, Tibet, and Britain was called at Simla, India. Shakabpa saw this conference as constituting recognition of Tibet’s independent status since China, Britain, and Tibet, according to Shakabpa, met as equals. In an attempt to reach a compromise between the Tibetans who believed Tibet was not a part of China and the Chinese who claimed Tibet was an integral part of its territory, the Indian Foreign Minister Henry McMahon (1862–1849) introduced the notion of an Inner Tibet and an Outer Tibet. He suggested that the Chinese government would not interfere with Outer Tibet, which would be considered “free and autonomous.” Meanwhile, Tibet would be considered suzerain to China, another novel concept in Sino-Tibetan relations.

In the end, Chinese negotiators did nothing more than initial the final accord. Chinese historians regard this as evidence that Tibet continued to be a part of China. When China withdrew from the conference, Britain and Tibet signed the Simla Convention without the signature of the Chinese plenipotentiary Yifan Zhen and then concluded their own separate agreement. Once again, Shakabpa argues this is strong evidence for Tibet having been an independent nation at that time. He maintains that:

Ever since the agreement was reached between the British and Tibetan governments, there was no longer any basis for dispute about whether Tibet was nominally included within China (in a relationship of suzerainty). Therefore, not only did it reaffirm that Tibet was free and independent, but Tibet’s authority to negotiate treaties directly was also clarified.

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c See Appendix 1, p. 1112 below.

d Suzerainty is a general concept in international relations in which one nation is regarded as reliant on a more powerful nation. The latter, called the suzerain, conducts foreign relations on behalf of the former, the tributary. See Michael C. van Walt van Praag, The Status of Tibet: History, Rights, and Prospects in International Law (London, Wisdom, 1987), 101–102.

e See p. 773 below.