



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

No ‘peaceful liberation’ of Tibet, says Chinese American scholar

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April 19, 2022

There was no “peaceful liberation” of Tibet. It was a brutal conquest through a very bloody war.

And unless the world community realizes Tibet’s importance, another war could break out in the region in the future.

That’s what independent scholar and author Jianglin Li said last week on “Tibet Talks,” a livestream and podcast hosted by the International Campaign for Tibet.

Jianglin appeared on the show to discuss her book, “When the Iron Bird Flies: China’s Secret War in Tibet,” which came out from the Stanford University Press in English in January with a foreword by the Dalai Lama. The book previously appeared in Chinese and Tibetan versions.

Throughout her appearance on Tibet Talks, Jianglin discussed the extensive research and startling discoveries that went into the book, which focuses on six crucial years in Tibetan history (1956-1962) that culminated in the Tibetan National Uprising of 1959 and the eventual total Chinese occupation of Tibet.

That occupation continues to this day, with Tibet now ranking as the least-free country on Earth alongside South Sudan and Syria, according to the watchdog group Freedom House.

Jianglin also spoke about her own experience as a native of China learning the truth of what the Chinese military did to the Tibetan people and reckoning with that history.

“It’s an important part of history. We need to know the facts from the myths,” she said. “We also have to understand about this part of history in order to understand all those events in recent years, why Tibetans are still fighting, why they’re resisting Chinese rule.”

No peaceful liberation

“When the Iron Bird Flies” takes its title from the 8th century Buddhist master Padmasambhava, who is claimed to have said that, “When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the Earth.”

During the Tibet Talk, Jianglin said that in 1956, when monks in Tibet’s Kham region saw Chinese warplanes bomb monasteries, “They didn’t know how to describe the thing they saw. They called it the iron bird.”

Those bombings were part of China’s war of conquest in Tibet, which the Chinese government has long sought to portray as a “peaceful liberation” of the Tibetan people.

Despite China’s deception, Jianglin uncovered Chinese military documents calling what happened a “war.”

Jianglin also used interviews with Tibetan survivors and other sources for her research.

“What’s my conclusion about all this research?” she said. “First of all, all this tells you there is no such thing as the ‘peaceful liberation’ of Tibet. Tibet was not a peaceful liberation. Tibet was a very brutal military conquest.”

Jianglin’s book also dispels several other myths about China’s takeover of Tibet, finding that:

- Although the Dalai Lama fled Tibet in 1959, the fighting was not limited to that period but spanned several years before and after. The conflict also was not limited to Central Tibet but included the other Tibetan provinces as well.
- Tibetans received little-to-no meaningful support from the United States and other countries during the war. The Tibetan people “really had no help from anywhere,” Jianglin said.

Threat to global security

That lack of international support also helps distinguish Tibet from the current crisis in Ukraine, Jianglin said. Although both Tibet and Ukraine were invaded by larger neighbors, Tibetans lacked a proper army to defend themselves with.

They also did not garner nearly the same level of attention from the international community that Ukraine has. “There was no publicity at all,” Jianglin said.

Although her book covers a span of time that now ended 60 years ago, Jianglin said the situation in Tibet should remain a major concern for the rest of the world because of Tibet’s geostrategic importance and role as “Asia’s water tower.”

Many of Asia’s major rivers originate in Tibet, with up to 2 billion people across the continent depending on them. But in recent years, China’s massive dam construction in Tibet has threatened communities downstream.

A study in 2020 found the Chinese government used its dams on the Dzachu River in Tibet (known elsewhere as the Mekong) to prevent the flow of water in 2019, contributing to a devastating drought in Southeast Asia.

“The environment of Tibet is definitely at least a regional security issue,” Jianglin said.

“For Asians, Tibet is something really crucial for regional peace,” she added. “But unfortunately, the Europeans, Americans ... they don’t quite understand this.

“If we don’t handle the situation well, a regional war may break out.”



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