

# Britain, Southeast Asia and the Korean War

Tarling, Nicholas. 2005. *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Impact of the Korean War*. Singapore: Singapore University Press. 538 pages, ISBN 9971 69 315 1

Thomas Crump

Nicholas Tarling, given the long list of books bearing his name, has demonstrated an unequalled knowledge of Southeast Asia during the period framed by the build-up and denouement of the Pacific War. His latest book of a trilogy opens with a review of Southeast Asia just before the Korean War in 1950 – only a few months after Mao Zedong had established the People's Republic of China – and continues through the two major conferences of the mid-1950s, in Geneva and Bandung.

By this time, the defeat of French forces at Dienbienphu had signalled that European colonialism, in whatever form, had no future in Southeast Asia. As Tarling makes clear, this had long been accepted by the British as a matter of post-war *realpolitik*, and, though only by 1949, by the Dutch as the result of *force majeure*. The French, however, faced a more difficult problem, for two reasons: first – after Mao's 1949 victory – its colonies in Indochina were much closer to the West's front-line confrontation with

communism; and second, any concessions in Southeast Asia would not go unnoticed by the indigenous populations of French North Africa, who were also claiming the right to independence. Nonetheless, following the 1954 defeat at Dienbienphu, the French, having nothing to gain by remaining in Indochina, simply ceased to be a factor in the equation. The implications of this provide the key to the diplomacy described in the second half of the book.

## Playing dominoes

Tarling's basic message is that everyone was playing for time, waiting to see whether the critical states (as they were seen in the early 1950s) of Laos, Cambodia, Burma and Thailand (Vietnam was still governed by France) would swing toward the communist East or the capitalist West. The West was haunted by domino-thinking long before the term gained world-wide currency as a result of its use by President Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. The threat – as perceived by the West – was of Chinese military intervention, which, after the Korean War (1950-53),

never came. The Chinese did well to hold back, since at the end of the day only Thailand, under its opportunist leader General Pibun, joined the western alliance – a decision that would later prove extremely advantageous to that country. Indonesia, meanwhile, was a constant western pre-occupation, especially because its sights were set on western New Guinea, which was still retained – with strong Australian support – by the Netherlands.

The United Kingdom, although constantly temporising, had accepted that all European colonies in Southeast Asia would sooner or later become independent, so that diplomacy in the whole region would have to be based on dealing with autonomous sovereign nations: on one side were India, Pakistan and Ceylon; on the other Australia, New Zealand and the U.S. All these countries, with their own self-interest at heart, were wary of new commitments in Southeast Asia, though Eisenhower and Dulles, while refusing to contemplate military intervention in Vietnam, had little choice but to commit consider-

able U.S. military and other aid following the French defeat at Dienbienphu.

## Cardboard characters

This is diplomatic history written by an undoubted expert. Its intensive use of primary sources, consisting mainly of telegrams, assumes not only that its readers have detailed regional knowledge, but that they are also acquainted with a Tolstoyan cast of British ambassadors and Foreign Office officials, ministers in the governments of France, the Netherlands and the U.S., all of whom are liable to replacement with changes of government – or simply in the normal course of duty – and whose opinions and advice are repeatedly cited. To give but one example, a certain J. G. Tahourdain is mentioned in the index 36 times, yet a Google search is needed to discover that he was the principal private secretary to the minister of state at the British Foreign Office – a man behind the scenes, *par excellence*. His advice (page 259) that 'the moral of all this is never say die' is also appropriate for Tarling's readers: they have much to learn from his book about an extremely

interesting period in modern world history, but far too many individuals are cited and far too little disclosed about who they were and why they counted. Particularly in a period so critical for the history of Southeast Asia after the end of the Pacific War, there must have been more to the world of diplomacy than the cardboard characters presented in *Britain, Southeast Asia and the Impact of the Korean War*. Although this is confirmed by a careful reading of Tarling's book, its immediate impact is still too diffuse: one point, however, that does come through, is the underlying wisdom of Britain's diplomacy at a very difficult time in its history. Here there is no doubting Tarling's patriotic stance – which, in the opinion of this reviewer, is largely justified. <

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# China's Tibet: marginalisation through development?

Fischer, Andrew Martin. 2005. *State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet: Challenges of Recent Economic Growth*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, xxvi + 187 pages. ISBN 87 91114 75 6

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China's Western Development Strategy (WDS) has pumped billions of yuan into developing Tibet. In July 2006, for example, an impressive feat of engineering, the world's highest railway (Qinghai-Tibet), was inaugurated in celebration of the Chinese Communist Party's 85th anniversary. Using official statistics and his own field observations, Andrew Martin Fischer explores the different ways government subsidies and large construction projects are affecting the lives of ordinary Tibetans.

The Tibetan Plateau stretches across the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), Qinghai and parts of adjacent provinces. A large part of the ethnic Tibetan population lives in the TAR, but over half live in lower level administrative divisions (autonomous prefectures, counties and townships) in the four predominantly Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. Extensive macro data on China's economic and social indicators has been available for some time, but before Fischer's study was neglected by western scholarship on Tibet. Relevant data outside the TAR is mostly aggregated at the provincial level and is difficult to extrapolate for Tibetans. Hence the author wisely focused on socio-economic conditions in the TAR and neighbouring Qinghai.

*State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet* is based on the author's doctoral dissertation for the London School of Economics. Graphic materials (one map, 26 tables, 19 figures, and 12 photos from the TAR, Qinghai and Sichuan) accompany his engaging analysis and qualitative field observations. The first two of the book's six chapters place Tibet within the context of China's political economy and its development over time. A methodological excursus (pages 6-12) provides useful pointers on the analysis and interpretation of Chinese statistics.

## Western Development Strategy: serving the people?

By 1996 the TAR's economy had begun to expand, and Tibetans with a secondary education have so far been relative beneficiaries. Chapter III (pages 32-87) is a masterful three-part study of the TAR and Qinghai economies under the WDS. The first part examines the growth and composition of the gross domestic product between 1998 and 2001, during which China's GDP expanded at an impressive annual average rate of 7.5%, that of Qinghai at 12.2% and that of the TAR at a walloping 17.5%. While the economy's primary sector (agriculture) remained generally sluggish, its secondary sector (construction, mining and industry) grew much faster than GDP in both the TAR and Qinghai. Meanwhile, expenditures for

the TAR's tertiary sector (government, party and social organisations) surged 24.8% per year. The author concludes that the increase 'probably indicates that an expansion of the control apparatus of the state was seen as an essential precondition to the subsequent steps of spending and investment under the WDS' (page 45). He also notes the very large military presence in the TAR and that military expenditures are secret and not included in the tertiary sector.

Chapter III's second part examines the sources fuelling GDP growth, namely state subsidies. By 2003 subsidies from the central government and provinces had ballooned to 74% of the TAR's entire GDP. Locally owned and managed farms, commercial ventures and services have been wholly dwarfed, engendering extreme outside dependence, imbalances in the local economy and an abdication of local power in decision-making. With the completion of the enormously expensive Qinghai-Tibet railway (stretching 1,142 km from Golmud to Lhasa), the TAR's economy is now at serious risk of going from boom to bust.

In chapter III's third part Fischer notes the extreme inefficiency of the TAR growth model: GDP growth through expansion of government and administration is not self-sustaining and requires increasing subsidies in order to be maintained. Beijing and min-

ion provinces use public development funds to pay Chinese companies to undertake construction work in Tibet, with minimal consideration of the local population's needs and without its participation. Many construction projects are ill-conceived and shoddily carried out. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges the cost-effectiveness of certain irrigation works in increasing agricultural yields.

## ... or putting their interests on hold?

Chapters IV and V analyse the impact of growth upon household incomes and different population strata. Some 85% of the Tibetan population of TAR and Qinghai is rural. Sharply declining terms of trade for staple products (wool and barley) combined with population growth, rising healthcare costs and environmental degradation have thrust over one-third of rural households into poverty or near-poverty. Tibetans realise that secondary sector employment is likely to be better paid, thus many move to urban centres only to become an ethnic underclass. After five decades of Chinese public education, Tibetans have the lowest educational level of any major national minority. According to the 2000 census, illiteracy averaged 9.1% nationally but was an atrocious 47.3% among Tibetans. Because only 15% of Tibetans have any secondary education, and because skilled Tibetan

labour is in extremely short supply, hardly any Tibetans occupy managerial or technical posts. Moreover, Han Chinese and Chinese Muslims from other provinces are crowding them out of administrative and commercial jobs. Development policy is apparently depriving Tibetans of control over their own future, at least in the short term.

As this is a socio-economic study largely based on an analysis of official government statistics, Fischer does not address cultural issues such as literacy and fluency in Chinese or Tibetan, the destruction of Tibet's traditional education system (monastic seminaries and universities) or the rights of occupied peoples. Nonetheless, *State Growth and Social Exclusion in Tibet* is a pioneering work that should greatly interest social policy and rural development students and scholars, development agencies, friends of Tibet and China and human rights activists. The final chapter's conclusions and recommendations on an array of practical measures (including the upgrading of primary and vocational education) to effectively improve the lot of Tibetans in 'autonomous' areas should engage the attention of decision-makers in China. <

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