

REPORT

1940s-1960s: The 13th Dalai Lama's 'Declaration' in Tsepon Shakabpa's *Tibet: A Political History*

SPEAKER



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Biographical Note



Dr. Scott Relyea is a historian of modern China, who holds a PhD from the University of Chicago, an MA in Chinese Studies from SOAS, University of London, an MA in International Affairs from George Washington University, and a BS in Journalism from Northwestern University. His research focuses on the political, social, and intellectual history of China's southwest borderlands, particularly Sichuan, Yunnan, and the Tibetan Plateau, with emphasis on nationalism, state-building, ethnic identity, and the interaction of empire, state, and nation. His current research examines China's incorporation of eastern Tibet, the origins of Sino-Tibetan tensions, and the historical relationship between state-building, colonisation, and infrastructure development.



Prof. Kaveri Gill is a development studies scholar whose research draws on heterodox economics, political economy, and interdisciplinary approaches. She completed her BA, MPhil, doctoral, and post-doctoral studies at the University of Cambridge and has worked across government, international organisations, and development consultancies, including the Planning Commission of India, UNICEF, the International Development Research Centre, and Oxford Policy Management. She joined Shiv Nadar University's Department of International Relations and Governance Studies in 2017. Her research spans informal economies, poverty, statelessness, and refugee studies, with a particular focus on Tibetans, as well as Nalanda Buddhist philosophy and practice in the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan region. She is also closely associated with Tibet House, New Delhi, where she completed the Nalanda Masters Course in Buddhist Philosophy in 2022.



Dr. Swati Chawla is a historian of modern South Asia and the Himalaya, holding a Ph.D. in History from the University of Virginia and BA, MA, and MPhil degrees in English from the University of Delhi. She is Assistant Director of the Centre for Learning and Innovative Pedagogies at JGU and has held fellowships with institutions including USAID, the American Institute of Indian Studies, Columbia University, and the Mercatus Center. Her research focuses on Tibetans in India, migration and citizenship, language movements, and the history of the Himalaya, with her current book project examining Sikkimese nationalism and Sikkim's incorporation into India in 1975. A trained digital humanist, she incorporates digital methods and archival research into her scholarship and teaching and has extensive experience mentoring students in archival methods and research on Tibet and the eastern Himalaya.

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Prof. Kaveri Gill situated the lecture within the broader question of Tibetan political history and historiography. She emphasised the importance of examining not only the historical information presented in *Tibet: A Political History*, but also the methods, perspectives, influences and biases informing its construction. She referred to later Tibetan reflections on Shakabpa's work, including reservations concerning his treatment of episodes in which he had himself been involved. She also drew attention to the book's use of coins and currency, seals, trade, relations with neighbouring polities and the patron-lama relationship as evidence for understanding Tibet's historical political position.

Prof. Gill further connected Shakabpa's historical writing with anti-colonial sentiment, nation-building and nationalism. Referring to Romila Thapar's observation that "all history is contemporary history", she stressed that historical writing cannot be separated from the political circumstances in which it is produced. She noted that the identification of the 1913 proclamation as a declaration of independence remains significant for contemporary arguments concerning Tibet, including questions over which historical period should be used when defining the territory of a unified Tibet. She concluded her framing remarks by emphasising that "history matters" and that "historiography matters".

Dr. Scott Relyea began his presentation by stating that it was based on a chapter written under the auspices of a multi-year, group research project, Building Nationalism in Inner Asia (<https://natinasia.hypotheses.org/>), funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR). His work on the chapter had expanded into a book-length study because of archival material he encountered. He described the project as a "biography" of Shakabpa's book, examining the events and experiences that influenced its research, writing and content, particularly in the context of decolonisation during the 1950s and 1960s. He also noted how Yale University Press and the Asia Foundation viewed Shakabpa, including the distinction between treating him as a historian or as a "native informant". The presentation focused on why and how Shakabpa came to identify the 1913 proclamation of the 13th Dalai Lama as an official declaration of Tibetan independence, while also highlighting the influence of India on Shakabpa and his manuscript.

Dr. Relyea organised the presentation around three material artefacts: a map, a passport and a seal. The map reproduced lines associated with the Simla Convention held between 13 October 1913 and 3 July 1914, distinguishing Inner Tibet, under Chinese sovereignty, from Outer Tibet, under Chinese suzerainty. In February 1967, Shakabpa requested that a line labelled the “Sino-Tibetan boundary, Qing dynasty” be removed because it did not fit his argument. Still, the request came too late, and the line remained in the published map.

The second artefact was a full-size copy of Shakabpa’s passport from the 1948 Tibetan Trade Mission. Dr. Relyea described it as the first Tibetan government-issued passport and noted its stamps from the United States, United Kingdom, Switzerland, France and Saudi Arabia. Shakabpa later submitted the passport to the United Nations General Assembly in 1959 as evidence of Tibet’s pre-1950 independence. Dr. Relyea also referred to Shakabpa’s statement to the Sikkim Political Officer in December 1947 that the mission’s real objective was propaganda in support of Tibet’s independent status.

The third artefact was an official seal presented to the 13th Dalai Lama in 1909. Shakabpa proposed presenting it as a “red seal showing Tibetan independence”. At the same time, Turrell Wylie, contracted by Yale to revise Shakabpa’s manuscript, objected to this interpretation, arguing that the inscription represented a severance from the Manchu emperor rather than independence. Dr. Relyea connected this material to the 1913 proclamation and to Shakabpa’s later historical argument.

The presentation then examined the 1947 Asian Relations Conference, where the Tibetan delegation participated separately from the Republic of China delegation. A large map displayed Tibet separately from China, but a Chinese delegate subsequently painted over the boundary line. Dr. Relyea suggested that Shakabpa may have learned of the episode through the Tibetan Foreign Office and that it may have influenced his understanding of maps as political evidence. He highlighted the irony that the line Shakabpa later sought to remove from his book was nearly identical to the line China had attempted to remove from the 1947 conference map.

Dr. Relyea subsequently turned to the changing language of decolonisation. He argued that, by the 1950s and 1960s, African and Asian states increasingly understood claims to political status through active assertions of independence from racialised colonialism rather than solely through historical evidence of prior independence. This posed difficulties for Tibet at the United Nations. The 1959 General Assembly resolution addressed human rights rather than Tibet’s independent status, while

many African and Asian states abstained. Ethiopia questioned whether Tibet could be treated as analogous to African and Asian cases of colonialism, and Article 2(7) of the UN Charter presented an additional difficulty.

Dr. Relyea then discussed Jayaprakash Narayan's efforts to place Tibet within Asian and African anti-colonial discourse. The 1959 All-India Tibet Conference in Calcutta brought together about 1,700 delegates and framed the issue in terms of human rights and self-determination. The 1960 New Delhi convention broadened the discussion to anti-colonialism in Asia and Africa and established a Committee on Anti-Colonialism. The Afro-Asian Council subsequently positioned Tibet alongside other decolonisation struggles. Dr. Relyea argued that these developments, together with the unsuccessful efforts at the United Nations, likely contributed to Shakabpa's identification of the 1913 proclamation as an official declaration of independence: an internal assertion that could establish Tibetans as distinct from Chinese without depending upon external recognition.

In her role as Discussant, Dr. Swati Chawla engaged with the historical interpretation of the 1913 proclamation and the evidentiary strategies through which Shakabpa constructed the case for Tibet's political status. Particular attention was given to the relationship between textual claims and material evidence, including the map, passport and seal, and to the significance of reading these sources in the international political context in which Shakabpa's book was produced.

Dr. Chawla also situated the argument within the wider international and Cold War setting of Tibet's representation. The discussion considered the role of Indian actors and anti-colonial networks, the changing language through which Tibet's political claims were presented to Asian and African audiences, and the difficulties involved in interpreting Tibet's political status through categories that were themselves changing during decolonisation. The discussion thereby reinforced the importance of examining Shakabpa's book not simply as a historical account but as a text produced within particular political and intellectual circumstances.

Image Gallery



Image Gallery



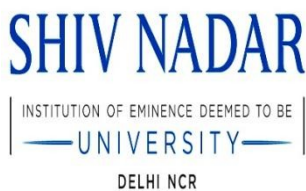
Image Gallery



Institutional Profile



The Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi (ICS) is one of the oldest research institutions on China and East Asia in India. It seeks to promote interdisciplinary study and research on China and the rest of East Asia, with a focus on developing expertise in China's domestic politics, international relations, economy, history, health, education, border studies, language and culture, and India-China comparative studies. It is the mandate of the ICS to develop a strategic vision for India's dealings with China in a comprehensive context. It therefore seeks to forge active links with business, media, government and non-governmental organizations in India, through workshops, applied research, executive training programmes, and seminars and conferences. It seeks to serve as a repository of knowledge and data grounded in primary, field-based research. The ICS organises four flagship conferences: All India Conference of China Studies, All India Conference of East Asian Studies, Conference on Domestic Governance in China, and India Forum on China. The Institute also undertakes various collaborative research programmes and multilateral initiatives with prominent institutions in India and abroad, and brings together leading and upcoming scholars through multiple fora. Among its many legacies, it has been conducting the iconic Wednesday Seminar for over 50 years and publishes the *China Report*, a peer-reviewed quarterly journal on China and East Asia, currently in its 62nd year of publication.



The Centre of Excellence for Himalayan Studies under the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence (SNIOE) is a research centre focussed on the economy, borders and identities, the environment and regional geopolitics of the wider Himalayan region, including the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram. While there are scholars of the Himalayas and small centres and research groups focused on the region, there is a need for institutionalised efforts at the national level that brings together a wide variety of disciplinary and sectoral approaches to the study of what is one of the world's most environmentally sensitive and politically fraught regions and one that simultaneously has a significant influence on the economic livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people. At the same time, it is difficult to ignore the role of geopolitics in this region. Therefore, even as the Centre pushes for an approach to studying the Himalayas that crosses both national and disciplinary boundaries as well as engenders a three-way conversation between central and local

governments, academia and the people who live in the region, it also remains sharply aware of and is attuned to geopolitics and the policy imperatives that surround it. The Centre reflects SNIOE's global outlook and ambitions, focusing on engaging researchers with niche or specialised interest in the wider Himalayas, and identifying and creating a network of scholars in the field, both in India and externally, to support its work. This critical mass of scholars of and from the region will redress the longstanding neglect or asymmetrical representation of the Himalayas and beyond, in knowledge, discourse and policy interventions. It also aims to develop and utilise strong links with the policy community and government agencies in a mutually supportive exercise. The Centre also signifies a leadership role for the SNIOE, as it attempts to fill gaps in both academic and policy spaces. This leadership role is in keeping with the University's identity and goals of promoting innovation, creativity and interdisciplinary engagement in the field of Indian education. The Centre also offers the SNIOE's own faculty and students opportunities to collaborate with counterparts from across the wider Himalayan region as well as those working on the region from elsewhere in the world.



The **India International Centre (IIC)** is a non-government institution widely regarded as a place where statesmen, diplomats, policymakers, intellectuals, scientists, jurists, writers, artists and members of civil society meet to initiate the exchange of new ideas and knowledge in the spirit of international cooperation. Its purpose, stated in its charter, is 'to promote understanding and amity between the different communities of the world'. In short, the Centre stands for a vision that looks at India as a place where it is possible to initiate dialogues in an atmosphere of amity and understanding.

Disclaimer: This is a report produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker, the discussant, the chair and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies. Since this is a report, it cannot be used for citation without confirming with the speaker(s).