While I was researching the March 1959 “Lhasa incident,”¹ the descriptions and information that I found scattered across large quantities of sources, along with the recollections of participants on both sides of the conflict, shifted my gaze toward a broader scope of time and space: the events that took place in the three traditional Tibetan provinces² in the years from 1956 to 1962.

A large amount of written material shows that intense military conflicts occurred in China’s southwestern and northwestern regions from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s, covering all three of the traditional Tibetan provinces, which today are known as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and the Tibetan prefectures of the four peripheral provinces. On one side of the conflict were the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Field Armies and regional units with their modern weaponry, as well as trained militia; on the other side were Tibetan farmers, herders, and monks, along with a handful of government officials and some Tibetan soldiers, armed mainly with homemade muskets, rifles, knives, and spears. This military conflict lasted six and a half years, from the early spring of 1956 through the summer of 1962. Of the PLA’s twelve military commands at that time, seven participated in this conflict to varying
degrees, drawing on infantry, artillery, cavalry, air force, armored and motor vehicle, and anti-chemical divisions, among others.

This was a military operation "under the unified command of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the leadership of local party committees," and its policy-makers and commanders were key figures in modern Chinese history, including Mao Zedong, chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and CMC; Zhou Enlai, premier and deputy chairman of CMC; as well as Deng Xiaoping, Yang Shangkun, Peng Dehuai, Su Yu, and Zhang Aiping. From a military perspective, the CCP’s military operation in the Tibetan regions was a complete success, but it is the least publicized of the CCP’s military engagements: The military operation was and has continued to be carefully avoided and covered up, both during the conflict and in the decades that followed. The Complete History of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, an authoritative ten-volume source published by China’s Academy of Military Science in 2000, refers to this conflict as a PLA “elite-force” military operation, summing it up in two sentences: “(March 1959) The Chinese People’s Liberation Army troops stationed in Tibet began pacifying an armed rebellion in Tibet on the 20th. The battle to suppress the rebellion ended in victory in March 1962.” These sentences hide a crucial fact: that in addition to the “troops stationed in Tibet” at that time, one of the main forces engaged in the battle in Tibet was the elite 54th Army, which had fought in the Korean War. This omitted information hints at a vastly complex reality whose violence and devastation were enormous both in their scale and in their impact on the modern history of the region. For instance, one of the facts not recorded there is that the air force dispatched two Tupolev Tu-4 aircrafts to strafe and bomb an armed rebellion at the Lithang (Litang) Monastery on March 29, 1956. Nicknamed the Bull, this type of aircraft was a Soviet-made long-range heavy bomber, the most advanced that the Chinese military owned at that time.

The total number of Tibetan casualties in this 6-year campaign may never be made known to the public. In 1961, the CCP held a “Northwest Ethnic Minorities Work Conference,” which partially redressed the “over-amplified pacification of the rebellion” in Qinghai and Gansu provinces, but what has been made public up to now omits key information.
1980s, the CCP finally acknowledged that it had “committed the error of over-amplification” in its war in the Tibetan regions and was compelled to provide some redress by releasing prisoners still in jail, rehabilitating large number of accused “rebels,” and providing small amounts of monetary compensation to the families of people “wrongly executed,” but the specifics remain classified to this day, and the information recorded in local gazetteers is confusing and incomplete. In short, after more than half a century, this military conflict remains a closely held secret.

After the Chinese edition of my book Tibet in Agony: Lhasa 1959 was published, in 2010, I immediately began researching this broader military conflict and its background, process, and aftermath.

For readers who may not have in-depth knowledge of the history of modern Tibet, I would like to provide a brief geographic and historical background.

First, regarding the definition of “Tibet”: The Chinese term Xizang has a specific meaning in China’s modern history, and is not equivalent to the traditional three Tibetan regions. Geographically, traditional Tibet included the three regions of Ü-Tsang and Ngari (Weizang Ali, central Tibet, and western Tibet), Kham (Kang, eastern Tibet), and Amdo (Anduo, northeastern Tibet), together covering approximately one fourth of today’s China, while Xizang refers to central Tibet, which is more or less the area of today’s Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).

Traditional Tibet had internal differences, not only in geography and customs but also in politics and administration. In his book Tibet: Past and Present (1924), the British diplomat Sir Charles Alfred Bell (1870–1945) elaborates this point. He refers to the regions where Tibetans live as “ethnographic Tibet” and calls the realm of the Lhasa government “political Tibet.” He adds, “While attempting to define the former, let us not neglect the latter.”

“Political Tibet,” i.e., the Ü-Tsang region plus Ngari, western Kham, and the Hor states, had a stable political system with a central government, the Kashag (cabinet) government in Lhasa, or Dewa Shung, formally
known as *Ganden Potrang*, which lasted for about three hundred years until it was abolished by the Chinese government on March 28, 1959. The rest of Kham was divided into a number of kingdoms and principalities, administrations that Chinese historical materials typically refer to as a “local chieftain (*tuci*) system,”12 emphasizing a subordination to imperial control that was often exaggerated or even fictitious.13

The agricultural areas of Amdo also supported several established kingdoms and principalities. For example, before the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was established, kingdoms such as Choné (Zhuoni)14 and the Gyalrong (Jiarong) states15 had endured for centuries. Pastoral areas were often governed by the headmen of tribal confederacies, called *shokka*, and their constituent units, called *tsowa* or *dewa*. These communities are referred to uniformly in official Chinese sources as “tribes” (*buluo*), although this term ignores the complex and specific character of the variety of social and political relations in different Tibetan regions. In English, as in Chinese, there are no simple terms to accurately describe the variety of polities and forms of social organization in traditional Tibet, and as the details are not the subject of this book, I have freely used the words “tribe” (in its loosest sense), and “clan” (which has a nearly identical meaning in English), for the sake of readability, along with the Tibetan *shokka* and *tsowa*, where they are known to apply, especially to describe the more independent pastoral groups of the Golok grassland and other areas of eastern Tibet.

The relation between Tibet and China also went through different stages. After the downfall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the Nationalist government established in the following year attempted to extend its rule to “political Tibet,” but without meaningful success. In 1917 and 1918, a military conflict broke out between the Tibetan and Chinese armies, resulting in a Tibetan government successfully taking back Chamdo (Changdu) and part of Kham. Drichu (the Jinsha River) remained the border between central Tibet and China, and Chamdo was ruled by Tibetans until 1950. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Nationalist government successfully incorporated Kham and Amdo into its political system by establishing new provinces. Qinghai Province was established in 1928, bringing a large part of Amdo and part of Kham into its jurisdiction. Xikang Province was
formally established in 1939, covering most of Kham. This process did not proceed without Tibetan resistance. Three military clashes collectively known as the Sino-Tibetan War took place in the 1930s between Tibetan forces and the Chinese army in Qinghai and Sichuan. The conflicts ended with ceasefire agreements and a reclarification of the borders between central Tibet and China. However, in many regions, especially pastoral areas, the Chinese government was unable to establish administrative power. Tibetan nomads and farmers in many areas kept their way of life until it was forcefully changed by the events described in this book.

It is worth noting that the period when the Nationalist government expanded its power to the Tibetan regions corresponded to the era when the Communist movement led by the CCP was underway. Due to their remoteness and cultural differences, the majority of Tibetans had not participated in the revolution. During the Long March (1935–1936), the Red Army, including most of the top CCP leaders, passed through Ngawa (Aba)16 and Garzê (Ganzi).17 It was not a happy encounter for either side. The Red Army leaders and soldiers found themselves penetrating an utterly alien region. In their desperate effort to find provisions, Red Army soldiers looted monasteries and villages and were ambushed by Tibetan tribesmen, resulting in quite a few military clashes. Due to the language barrier, CCP propaganda was minimally effective in wooing Tibetan support, and only five Tibetan youths followed the Red Army all the way to Yan’an to be groomed as communist cadres. When Mao Zedong announced the founding of the PRC on October 1, 1949, the PLA occupied only half of the country. It soon advanced toward regions inhibited largely by ethnic minorities, including the traditional Tibetan regions of Amdo and Kham. One year later, central Tibet was occupied by the PLA. Details of this process are presented in chapter 7 of this book.

After taking power, the CCP immediately launched a series of political campaigns to remold China into a socialist country. In the first ten years of the PRC, political movements such as land reform, the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, the establishment of state-private
partnerships (SPPs) in industry and business, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Agricultural Cooperative Movement, and the Great Leap Forward swept across the country, resulting in the largest famine in Chinese history and millions of deaths by execution and starvation. The events described in this book took place within this general time frame.

Even though most of the political campaigns mentioned above also took place in the ethnic minority regions and caused the same catastrophic results, as described in various chapters of this book, in those areas the CCP was somewhat flexible in implementing its policies based on local social and economic conditions. For example, land reform, referred to as “democratic reform” in minority areas, started a few years later there than in inland China. In the Tibetan regions (areas where Tibetans live, known after 1951 as “the-four-province-one-region Tibetan areas”), it was launched in different years in different provinces: in Yunnan in 1955, Sichuan in 1956, Gansu and Qinghai in 1958, and the TAR in 1959. Nor was the Great Leap Forward necessarily a driving force in all of the Tibetan regions. In fact, reform in the Tibetan regions of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces began prior to the Great Leap Forward. However, it was a main factor in pushing land reform and the cooperative movement in certain Tibetan regions, particularly in the pastoral areas of Qinghai. Other political campaigns, such as the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Agricultural Cooperative Movement, and the Great Leap Forward, took place in the Tibetan region as well, sometimes in a different variation. For example, in pastoral regions, cooperatives had two forms: Public-Private Partnership and communes.

As we will see in the book, both the goal and the methods of land reform in Tibet were essentially the same as in inland China. The same vocabulary was used as well, including “land reform work team,” “struggle meeting” (douzheng hui), “spitting bitterness rally” (grievance-venting) (suku hui), and dividing society into different classes. On the other hand, some initiatives, such as the so-called Religious System Reform Movement, were much more destructive in Tibetan regions than in inland China.
The modern Chinese administrative divisions of traditional Tibet are essentially colonial in nature and conception, often cutting across traditional boundaries and inevitably blurring the historical identity of these places, while the Tibetan concept of the “three regions” does not describe current administrative reality. In order to provide a clearer account of this segment of history, this book will use the term “Tibetan regions” to refer specifically to the “Tibetan regions of the four provinces,” i.e., the traditional Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo, and will use the term “Tibet” to specifically refer to the Tibet Autonomous Region, i.e., Ü-Tsang, Ngari, and the Nagchu (Naqu) and Chamdo regions. I must emphasize that this book uses these designations purely for the sake of narrative clarity and to facilitate the citation of sources, and not based on my personal views regarding Tibet’s history and politics.

The CCP’s process of establishing grassroots government in Tibet produced the administrative place names in use today, which are usually but not always based on Chinese-language pronunciations of the Tibetan names. This book uses the Tibetan place names by default, with their Chinese equivalents on first occurrence and in direct quotations from Chinese sources. A bilingual conversion table is appended to relieve any confusion. Regrettably, because I was unable to conduct field research, it was sometimes difficult to determine the locations of some smaller places that don’t appear on maps. In such cases, I have done my best to identify major landmarks, such as mountain ranges, monasteries, lakes, and rivers, in order to give readers a better idea of where events occurred.

For many years, modern Tibetan studies have mainly focused on central Tibet. I must point out that the events described in this book are not limited to what is now the Tibet Autonomous Region, and my focus is not limited to the fate of the Tibetan elites. Most events presented in this book took place in Kham and Amdo, in remote pastures or villages little known to outsiders, and are intimately connected with the fate of ordinary people, including nomads, farmers, monks, and merchants. Their stories run through the entire book.
of Aten, recounted by the exiled Tibetan author Jamyang Norbu, the personal experiences of relevant persons in the book are all drawn from my interviews in Tibetan refugee settlements in India and Nepal. All of the details provided by the interviewees were cross-referenced against official Chinese materials.

The vast majority of the figures, photos, and maps in this book come from Chinese-language sources, including more than 200 county, prefectural, military, population, and CCP historical and organizational gazetteers for the Tibetan regions; hundreds of internal reports on the Tibetan regions published in the Xinhua News Agency periodical Internal Reference (Neibu Cankao) from 1949 to 1962; around 200 biographical essays by frontline PLA officers and soldiers as well as biographies of and memoirs by high-ranking commanders; and dozens of situation reports relating to PLA battle units. Primary sources also include records of interviews with more than 100 Tibetans, a portion of which are listed in the bibliography of this book.

I need to point out that the official Chinese sources include classified and “semiclassified,” i.e., “neibu” or “internal” publications, most of which have never been formally made available to researchers and general public. The Chinese government system is comprised of three branches: the party, the military, and the administration, with the party above the other two. Depending on the importance of their contents, documents are categorized as “top secret” (juemi), “classified” (jimi), or “internal” or “semiclassified” (neibu), and each level has a restricted range of circulation. Normally, documents marked “top secret” circulating among leaders at the provincial level and above; “classified” documents are available to leaders all the way down to the county level; and “semiclassified” neibu documents are usually restricted to party members and cadres, not to be viewed by the general public. Given the large number of officials and party members, however, many classified and semiclassified documents have to be printed in considerable quantities. At the same time, each province also produces its own document collections for its own internal use. As a result, keeping all the historical documents secret is not an easy task.
Since the 1980s, many historical documents have found their way into used bookstores and/or been sold online by used-book sellers. Some collections have appeared in electronic databases, and some have been collected and sold by print-on-demand companies. Over the years, I have been able to find thousands of pages of documents that have not been formally declassified in libraries, archives, and used bookstores. All of the classified documents cited in this book have been verified by comparing them with other sources or with censored open publications.

The Chinese edition of this book was published in 2012 by Taiwan's Linking Publishing Company (Lianjing chuban gongsi). For the English edition I have made many revisions and added some details that I discovered more recently, and I have also corrected some figures based on newly discovered military documents. The events described in this book took place over a vast area, so it is quite a challenge to present them in a coherent and accessible way for readers who might not be familiar with China's recent history. I have opted to break this complicated and little-known history into smaller scenes, interwoven with personal experiences. At the end of the book, statistics that I have worked out from many volumes of official publications provide readers with a fuller picture of what happened in the Tibetan regions in those years.

This book can only serve as a starting point, providing a general picture of this hidden war. I look forward to more memoirs by those who experienced this period, as well as the declassification of and public access to files, more researchers taking an interest in this period of history, and the use of multi-faceted research to fill in the details of this blank space in the modern history of both Tibet and China and to correct any errors and omissions in my account.

While I was researching and writing this book, Tibetans in all three Tibetan regions began a new round of resistance against Chinese Communist rule. This time they protested with self-immolation, using their lives to draw the world’s attention to their situation. Perhaps history can tell us why one generation of Tibetans after another has continued to resist, and why their resistance is so absolute.