

tashi dele from Tibet [April-May 1999]

1. Impressions and surprises

Recently I traveled for two and a half weeks in Xizang, China. You know this area not by its Chinese name but as Tibet. My perspective, that of an occidental who has lived in China for over a decade, is quite different from most of the views on Tibet found in either Western or Chinese media. This really shouldn't surprise you who know me. It seems that my views on just about everything are non-mainstream. It's not just that I am writing to the sounds of a different drummer; it's like I am using a tonal system that has not yet even been developed. My views on Africa, on Chinese education, indeed my views on just about anything concerning the USA, are not just out of the main flow; they are not even in the water. Sometimes, my unusual (I hate to use the term radical) views are appreciated; most often they do not find an audience. So, anyway, here are my notes from my travel in Tibet. I have decided to forsake commenting on things touristique; suffice it to say that Tibet from a tourist's point of view provides an extremely interesting experience. For me it was a pleasant experience, save for the headaches and shortness of breath that result from being on the world's rooftop.

I went to Tibet with all sorts of expectations, prejudices and preconceptions. I expected poverty in Tibet to be quite obvious, for statistically it is one of the poorest regions in one of the poorest countries on earth (worse off by some statistics than even West Africa which I visited a few months before). But I had not realized that Tibet is really four Tibets. First, there are the cities of Lhasa and Shigatse which for most practical purposes should be considered Chinese cities, with Chinese infrastructure, schools, hospitals, etc. Then, there are the hundreds of towns, which have much less Chinese influence and more Tibetan flavor. The towns still have schools and clinics and perhaps a single Chinese restaurant, but most of the people are Tibetan. Third, there are villages and even smaller settlements, which have virtually no Chinese influence. Finally, there is nomadic Tibet, herdspeople who live as they have for thousands of years. They have some contact with the larger economy nowadays, but their chief contact with the world is through their monasteries and nunneries, some 1,500 in Tibet, many of them with only one or two monks in residence.

Tibet's nomads and village folk live simple lives; they do not have much access to modern education, welfare and health services. They live in a world without development. I am not at all convinced it is in their interest to be brought into the 20th, much less the 21st century. For fifty years, Tibetans have migrated to towns and cities, but a village and nomad population still exists. Whether a rural life style clashes with the interests of the PRC in the future remains uncertain. I did not see a backward, impoverished Tibet. I saw a land where, in the rural areas at least, people lived in the past. Whether this lifestyle should be changed (some would say improved) to ensure that Tibet reaches the health, education and welfare standards and expectations of the rest of China and the developed world depends on point of view. The tradeoff is that traditional culture would be lost. At the moment Chinese policy dictates that part of Tibet should be developed and that part of

it should remain traditional. This seems like a fairly sensible policy, but like most sensible policies, it may be short-lived.

Shenzhen, where I have been recently living, is China's most developed area. So I expected a sharp contrast between Shenzhen and Tibet, not just in the economic status of the inhabitants, but in culture as well. Whether Tibet has been part of China for centuries, as Chinese officials argue, depends on which historians' views you subscribe to. In any case, Tibet was a Buddhist kingdom which has had some sort of political relationship with China for a very long time. At this moment Tibet is fully a part of China. The region is called the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and the Chinese government policy treats it very differently from the rest of China. The government pumps in a lot of money into Tibet, subsidizing health, education and welfare in the cities, and providing various incentives for Han Chinese who consent to work in what is considered a hardship posting.

Tibet is home to about 2.5 million ethnic Tibetans. In the three Chinese provinces that border Tibet dwell another 2.5 million Tibetans; there are, for example, complete Tibetan villages in Sichuan Province, which is to Tibet's east. There are about another 200,000 Tibetans outside of China, mostly in northern India, where the spiritual leader, the 14th Dalai Lama, lives, as well as in other countries, mostly the U.S. and Switzerland. Tibet is not all ethnic Tibetans. There are about one million ethnic Han Chinese in Tibet, mostly living in the two major cities (Lhasa and Shigatse) or in army outposts. The People's Liberation Army is thought to have about 200,000 men stationed in Tibet; most are involved in road construction, other civil engineering projects and border control. Tibet borders Burma, India, Bhutan, Nepal and just misses Pakistan.

What surprises most visitors to Tibet is that there are so many Han Chinese. This did not surprise me, for I was fully aware that Tibet for 50 years has been secured within the borders of the PRC, something recognized by most of the world's politicians. I knew that China has been encouraging Han Chinese to move to Tibet. I also knew that Tibet is under-populated in relation to over-crowded China. Given this reality I had expected to see more Han Chinese in Tibet.

One of the criticisms by those who advocate a Tibet free of China (and Han Chinese and their cultural influence) is that the Chinese government has been ethnically cleansing Tibet of Tibetans. This is quite a distortion of what has happened. When one thinks of ethnic cleansing, we look at what happened a few years ago in Central Africa or more recently in the Yugoslav region, or what the Turks did to the Armenians earlier in the century, the Nazis to the Jews, etc. Perhaps there is no better case of ethnic cleansing in world history than how the United States treated Native Americans. All these behaviors of atrocity had goals to eliminate minority cultures. Under Chinese administration, since 1950, the quality of life for Tibetans, however, has actually improved in many ways. Life for them, of course, has changed. This is not unusual. Cultures change over time. Minority cultures tend to adopt the ways of majority cultures. Tibet is more urban now than before 1950; the religion is under strict government control. That the Chinese government does not allow freedom of worship, however, is not ethnic cleansing. Over the years I have met

Americans who are pained by China's handling of Tibet. The more I talk with them, however, the more I realize that they have so little idea of what China's handling of Tibet actually involves. Sadly, China-bashing is not a difficult task for most Americans. Maybe the Chinese Premier's recent suggestion that those who advocate a Free Tibet should visit the region to learn more about it is not far off the mark.

One thing that did surprise me about Tibet was its lushness. Yes, it is a plateau, some 5000 meters above sea-level, but it gets a lot of water; and despite a short growing season, there is huge agricultural potential in Tibet. I expected to find moonscape or at least ground that was totally inhospitable to modern agriculture. That is not the case, in sharp contrast with much of the rest of China. China itself is not a rich nation in terms of agricultural land. In fact, compared to countries like India and the US, China seems to have been slighted when arable land was bestowed. Demographers advise us that China's agricultural land is sufficient for a country of about only three-quarters of its current size (exactly where the country wants to be after a century of experiencing population control policies, sometime in the 22nd century.) Still, as China's population will continue to rise during the first half of next century, it will find itself more and more dependent on foreign food imports (something that can save the economies of efficient food producers such as the US, Canada and Australia). Tibet offers China much potential land for growing crops; and this potential will probably start to be recognized sometime after a rail link with the Mainland (Lhasa - Golmud, Qinghai) is completed in a few years. From the Chinese perspective, Tibet is also rich in natural resources, an array of minerals and metals waiting to be mined.

What also surprised me about Tibet was the extent of Tibet-Han interaction. I had heard there was no marriage between the races. I don't think this is true. I saw individuals who had both Chinese and Tibetan facial features (Tibetan noses and rosy cheeks; Han cheek bones and eyes). For the most part Chinese in Tibet live in the two cities, where they are a sizable minority of the population (by observation I would guess 25%). These cities of Lhasa and Shigatse are divided into Chinese and Tibetan districts, which combine residences and commerce. During business hours (which in China run into the evening), however, there is a cultural mix. I expected more segregation than I found. It seems to me that over the past 50 years the majority and minority cultures have found an accommodation. I have no way of knowing whether the Tibetans are comfortable with this arrangement. Tibetans in cities are much better off economically (as are virtually all Chinese) than they were before the founding of the PRC. I do not know to what extent hate crimes or ethnic disputes exist. There is violence, I suspect more so than in other Chinese cities. A Japanese traveler, one of my roommates at a Lhasa hostel, witnessed a stabbing the night he arrived. A dispute between three Chinese and a Tibetan culminated in the latter stabbing one of the Chinese. I heard another tale by a traveler who saw police carry away a bleeding Tibetan. Tibetan males traditionally sheave knives; I would expect the incidents of stabbing to reflect the availability of weapons (Fortunately, China restricts gun ownership!).

Another thing that surprised me does not surprise most visitors, who visit Tibet specifically because of the land's spirituality. I was astonished at the personal religious commitments made by a large part of the Tibetan population. Lhasa is full of pilgrims wandering along specific routes, visiting shrines and monasteries. Religion is not just important, it is the most important part of many Tibetan's lives. Faith seems very important for the average people of Tibet, at least on the par with devout Muslims or Christians. Here, such a large part of the population seems devout, which is not how I would characterize the people of most Islamic or Christian countries I have visited. Perhaps my surprise is due to the fact I have lived in an officially atheist country, in the developed China South, where about the only thing worshipped is money. In contrast with secular China, where ancestor worship is important but is not what I would describe as a real religion, Buddhism in Tibet is the guiding way of one's life. Traditionally, Tibetan families are supposed to place one son into the monastery. This happens in Thailand, but the son remains a monk for only two years. In Tibet, he is supposed to spend his whole life in the religious order.

In sum, I expected to see a Tibet of poverty at the West African magnitude. I did not find Tibet's urban areas to reflect the pervasive destitution I saw in African cities. Chinese government propaganda describes the area as backward. Economically, it is backward by China's development standards. Is that so bad? I also saw a Tibet of much potential (agriculture, minerals) to serve the needs of the PRC. This produces a major dilemma: to develop or not? In whose interests is development anyway? I found a Tibet where religion is so much a part of people's lives, much more so than anywhere I have ever visited. To have such a religious outpost in an officially atheist country is in a sense shocking. Not that I don't approve of it, just that I didn't expect China to be as tolerant as it now apparently is. I was indeed pleased that as much distance as time has been placed between now and the sordid events of the Cultural Revolution, only a generation ago, when monks and nuns were persecuted and murdered, monasteries ravaged, and religious relics destroyed. Yet much improvement is needed, something I will comment on in the next essay.

2. Why the Dalai Lama must return to Tibet

Tibetan Buddhism has two important strains, each with its own leader. The smaller of the strains is under the auspices of the Panchen Lama. The followers of the Panchen Lama work out of various monasteries in Tibet, the most luxurious of which is the Tashilhunpo Monastery, which I visited, in Shigatse. Recently, the Panchen Lama monasteries have received financial help from China and are undergoing substantial physical rehabilitation. At various times the 10th Panchen Lama, who died in 1989, was considered an ally of (or co-opted by, depending on point of view) the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Apparently with the CCP's oversight, an 11th Panchen Lama was chosen a few years ago. Lamas are traditionally chosen by a process that involves identifying an infant who is the reincarnation of the previous lama; the selection process for the 11th included criteria of parental political correctness. In any case, the 11th, still a child, lives in Beijing under the

watchful eye of the government. Just a few days after I visited Tibet, the 11th himself was permitted to visit and officiate at various ceremonies.

The other strain of Tibetan Buddhism is the larger and more religiously significant one, that of the Dalai Lamas. The current Dalai Lama, who is the fourteenth in succession, worked with the new government of the PRC from about 1950, when he was just 15 years old, when the CCP secured the new nation's frontiers, until he fled China in 1959. The record suggests that the 15-year-old lacked the political experience to deal with such a consummate politician as Mao Zedong. From the accounts I have read, the Dalai Lama seemed unable to control the political situation in Tibet, the 1959 street riots which the CCP felt very threatened by. The Dalai Lama took the advice of his associates and moved to northern India.

The respect for, and indeed the mythology surrounding, the Dalai Lama runs deeply in Tibet. Locals will often ask tourists for photos of the 14th Dalai Lama, effigies which are prohibited by government decree issued several years ago (a bit silly, don't you think, for a world power to restrict photographs of a religious leader?). The Dalai Lama is an internationally recognized humanitarian, whose speaking engagements around the world generate sufficient funds to maintain his Establishment in India, the so-called government in exile. The Dalai Lama won the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize, although some Chinese I have talked with view that award more as a Scandinavian rebuke to the government for the Tiananmen crackdown, than as an award for the spiritual leader's positive deeds. The fact remains, however, that as respected as the Dalai Lama is outside of China, he does not figure in Tibetan policy. He has no influence whatsoever in the decisions made by the CCP and various Chinese administrative units. His spiritual effect in Tibet may be profound, for he is worshipped as a living god, but he has had absolutely no material effect on the lives of Tibetans. I view this as a tragedy, for the Dalai Lama is perhaps the only person in the world who can represent the interests of ethnic Tibetans and serve as a force to help mold a positive Chinese policy in which economic development enriches the lives of Tibetans while not destroying their culture..

To fully understand why the Dalai Lama is needed back in China is to realize how the Chinese Communist Party makes decisions. The CCP does not listen to individuals or indeed to governments who attempt to offer constructive criticism from abroad. Despite American propaganda in the 1950s and 1960s that pictured the Chinese communists as exporters of Mao-type guerrilla warfare, the Chinese state has generally practiced isolationism. Even today as a world power it is reluctant to get involved in world affairs, as its votes and abstentions in the United Nations reflect, and it certainly does not like others to "interfere in our domestic policy." The Chinese like to mind their own business, which is why the NATO bombing of their embassy in Belgrade made them so irate. If anything, the Free Tibet demonstrations that dogged Premier Zhu Rongji on his spring 1999 visit to the USA had the result of making China (at least its politicians if not its average citizen) even more firm in its Tibet policy resolve. The anti-Zhu demonstrations likely created support for conservative elements who wish more repression in Tibet, exactly fearing foreign-inspired Free Tibet activism as that seen abroad. China, as a

nation-state, worked for several millennia to obtain frontiers it could be comfortable with. That did not happen until 1950. It is inconceivable to me that China would ever set free an inch of its present territory. I doubt the Free Tibet movement has much if any support among China's population. I have never met a single Chinese intellectual, many of whom do not like the CCP and who support democracy much sooner than later, who believes Tibet is not part of China.

To say that China's leaders will not listen to foreign protests is not to suggest the CCP turns a blind eye and ear to public opinion. The CCP is especially sensitive to public opinion at home. China's history is dotted with movements and revolutions that have been sparked at the local level. Activism and opposition are usually handled in-house, within the CCP, away from CNN. Some policy issues, such as the Three Gorges Project or the future of the special economic zones, were let out for public opinion, but these are rare occurrences.

If the Dalai Lama returned to China, Tibet would inevitably get into the forum of public opinion. Indeed, his return would be worthless if he were excluded from the public eye. This is where opportunities lie for the Dalai Lama, who has a standing invitation to return to China. This invitation may well be an official bluff, for one must doubt whether the CCP really wants the Dalai Lama's input in its Tibet's decisions, not to mention CNN coverage. What China feared a generation ago was the continuation of the feudal theocracy that characterized Tibet under lama rule. Certain elements within the CCP today may legitimately fear religion's intervention in politics. The separation of religion from politics and from economics is not easily done, however. Before any return of the Dalai Lama, restrictions on the types of activities he could engage in would have to be negotiated and made clear to all parties. His participation in issues seen by the CCP as political will not occur.

The largest restraint on the Dalai Lama's return to China is possibly not from the Chinese side, which probably doesn't give the matter much thought. The Dalai Lama's Establishment, which has set up a sort of feudal theocracy of its own in India, is likely to oppose negotiations and dialog. The funds that the Dalai Lama raises internationally keeps his Establishment in a lifestyle that is superior to anything they could expect if they returned to China, which is still more or less a socialist country. It is doubtful whether China would allow returning monks to become feudal lords. Would the monks really want to return to Tibet, a land of poverty? I suspect not.

Yet, without the Dalai Lama's return, who is to represent the interests of ethnic Tibetans? The CCP says it represents the interests of all Chinese, which I believe to be a true intention. But ethnic Tibetans account for less than half of one percent of all Chinese citizens. Letting the majority represent the minority is not quite as bad as letting the fox watch the chicken coop, but it comes close. The CCP cannot be expected to put the interests of Tibetans above the interests of other Chinese. There are 2.1 billion Chinese who need agricultural land and minerals for future development. Today, I fear that no one in China speaks solely for the interests of Tibetans.

The Dalai Lama's role in Tibet cannot be that of an activist spiritual leader, like the Catholic priests in Latin America. China is inching toward a society that offers religious freedom, but it is still far from there. The CCP still wants religion out of politics. It will not accept even mild public criticism of the government. I think that the Dalai Lama's more positive role is to oversee the monasteries, most of which are rural, which can provide education, health care and welfare to towns, villages and nomads. The monasteries can monitor local development and report cases where it negatively impacts on traditional culture. Would the CCP accept such a rural role for the Dalai Lama? There is less for the Party to fear in the short-term with the Dalai Lama's setting up and running schools and clinics out of agrarian monasteries than his holding mass meetings in the Tibetan capital. For the Dalai Lama to be effective, all his opposition (used in the sense of 'loyal opposition') would have to be in-house and low-key. There is plenty of opposition within China policy circles; it is just not the type that makes the headlines. It is unclear that a man who has spoken with such a loud voice at so many international fund-raisers can tone down his act, adapt a Chinese style of negotiation, and be satisfied with small accomplishments. Small accomplishments like getting the government to fund textbooks for rural monasteries to teach rural Tibetans to read and write. Or providing funds for a monk to provide health care to nomads.

Sadly, I suspect it is not in the interests of the CCP or those of the Dalai Lama Establishment for the Dalai Lama to return to China. It is, however, in the interests of the Tibetan people, who face alternative futures, some less positive than others. One of the most negative scenarios predicts that upon the Dalai Lama's death, there will be no successor. Or that his successor will be under CCP control, as is the child Panchen Lama. The Dalai Lama is now 65 years old. If he waits much longer, the issue of his return will be moot.