

# Voices from Tibet

## Selected Essays and Reportage

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Edited and translated by Violet S. Law



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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	vii
<b>Introduction</b>	ix
Robert Barnett, Columbia University	
<b>I. Old Lhasa Politicized</b>	1
Freedom for Chinese, Autonomy for Tibetans	1
Where Are Tibetans in the Chinese Dream	3
Beijing Olympics: Divided World, Divided Dream	5
The Qinghai-Tibetan Railway Conscripted	7
The Next Big One	10
The Fall of Lhasa	11
Let Go of the Dalai Lama	13
Tibetans Are Ruined by Hope	14
From Self-Immolation to Self-Rule	16
<b>II. Economic Imperialism with Chinese Characteristics</b>	19
Winners and Losers under Tibet's Capitalism	19
Public Square or Propaganda?	20
The Pernicious Fungus Economy	22
The "Nineteenth Army"	23
Tibetan Women Marry Han Chinese as a Way Out	24
Merchants of Fake Culture	26
Only State-Sanctioned Tour Guides Need Apply	28
Railroad to Perdition	29
Riding the Train to Lhasa	31

<b>III. Religion under Siege</b>	<b>33</b>
Cassock vs. Police Uniform	33
Framing Monks as Terrorists	34
The World's Youngest Political Prisoner	36
Why Tibetans Flee to India?	38
Helicopters over Stupas	39
Stampede in Jokhang	41
Barkor at Nightfall	43
Highway Robbery in Holy Places	44
<b>IV. Wrecking Nature</b>	<b>49</b>
Siphoning off Tibetan Water	49
Herders Are Strangers on Their Land	50
Every Inch of Land Is Sacred	52
Betting on Tibetan Land	54
How Fur Becomes Tibetan Fashion	55
Disappearing Lhasa	57
Regret in a Half-Century	59
<b>V. Culture Twisted, Trampled</b>	<b>61</b>
Scrapping Tibetan Lessons for Stability	61
Must Children Trade Roots for Books?	62
Ye All Celebrate Chinese Festivals	64
Official Ban a Helpful Reminder	66
Ringling in the Tibetan New Year	68
Contemporary Artists Sound Off	69
Resistance to Sell Out	71
What Remains of Tibet?	73
<b>Epilogue</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Source List</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>83</b>

# Chapter I

## Old Lhasa Politicized

### Freedom for Chinese, Autonomy for Tibetans

“He got the prize!”

I received this text message from a friend in Beijing, when I was on a train pulling into Lhasa on the afternoon of October 8, 2010.

Mr. Liu Xiaobo, whom we know so well, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Excited, I immediately sent his wife, Liu Xia, a congratulatory text message. Whether or not she got it is anybody’s guess. By the time I got a chance to call her, her cell phone was already disconnected. So I sent this message to many of my friends—Tibetans, Hans, and foreign journalists in Beijing: “Cheers for the first ever Chinese Nobel Peace laureate.”

I have known Mr. Liu for many years, but I have never addressed him as ceremoniously as I do now.

I still recall one late night when his stammering voice came through Skype to invite me to co-sign Charter 08.<sup>1</sup> Out of respect and trust, and the fact that he has long been concerned about the Tibet issue, I signed without any hesitation.

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1. Charter 08 is a manifesto for human rights, democracy and rule of law, of which Liu and a few other Chinese activists were main sponsors. A clarion call to end to one-party rule, it surfaced on the Internet circa the fall of 2008 and its name invoked Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia thirty-one years before.

Not too long afterwards, Mr. Liu was taken away from his home by the authorities. And a year later, on a gloomy Christmas Day in 2009, he received a hefty sentence of eleven years.

When protests spread across the Tibetan regions in March 2008, the Communist Chinese government suppressed with a heavy hand, aggravating the situation. Liu led thirty intellectuals in China in making a twelve-point proposal to the authorities on handling the situation. The proposal garnered considerable support within the country and beyond. Following his lead, as many as three hundred Tibetologists and other scholars from around the world sent a petition, calling on then Chinese President Hu Jintao to properly resolve the Tibet issue.

In addition, Liu also penned several articles on the Tibet issue. In “The Tibet Crisis Is the Failure of Materialist Dictatorship,” he said: “Blinded by materialism, the Chinese Communist Party does not see the great importance of religion to the human spirit, nor does it understand the sacred significance of the Dalai Lama to a pious people. He not only is the soul of the snow country but also the ultimate symbol of resistance of a puny people against the authoritarian Chinese regime. To have kept a pious people from their god for forty years is tantamount to depriving them of their core value. Leveling all those libelous accusations against the Dalai Lama is like gouging out Tibetans’ heart with a knife.”

In another article, Liu again pulled no punches: “In order to achieve Sino-Tibetan unity, Han Chinese must learn to respect Tibetans’ religious belief. The best way to show respect is to allow the soul of the snow country—the Dalai Lama—to come home.”

Ultimately, Liu saw how the political destinies of Hans and Tibetans intertwine. In “So Long as Han Chinese Have No Freedom, Tibetans Will Have No Autonomy,” he wrote: “So long as Han people live under dictatorship, it will be unthinkable that Tibetans precede them in gaining freedom. And so long as people in China proper are denied authentic self-rule, self-rule for Tibetans and other minorities will remain a pipe dream.”<sup>2</sup>

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2. Translated by Eva S. Chou, *No Enemies, No Hatred: Selected Essays and Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

And Liu came to my defense in 2004, when I was punished by the authorities for my book of essays on Tibet. He published an essay entitled “Woeser’s Faith and Communist China’s Atheism,” in which he said: “The confrontation between a female Tibetan writer and a long-standing regime is one between freedom of faith and repression of belief, between human dignity and humiliation, and between benign belief and hardened violence.

“With its repeated intimidation, repression of religious freedom and political dissent, the Chinese Communist Party once again showed the world its vulgar, barbaric materialistic atheism.”

Here, out of my deepest respect I salute Mr. Liu Xiaobo for his well-deserved Nobel Peace Prize! On an auspicious day, I shall go to a sacred temple in Lhasa and pray that he regains freedom as soon as possible.

\* \* \*

## Where Are Tibetans in the Chinese Dream?

Should we continue to place our hope on the Chinese Dream? To wit, the new Chinese president, Xi Jinping, will change his country’s stance on the Tibet issue. Many people are hoping for a softening, or even constructive change.

Questions on what to expect on this issue often give me headaches. Because those who ask invariably follow up with a sentimental footnote in their retelling of the timeworn tale: That Xi’s late father, Xi Zhongxun, then a high-level Chinese Communist Party official in his prime, struck up a friendship with the twenty-ish Dalai Lama. And he recalled that the elder Xi had left an impression of an enlightened gentle soul.

Now that the younger Xi has become China’s most powerful man, those trying to predict how he will rule Tibet take into account not only his late father’s amicable rapport with the Dalai Lama and the Tenth Panchen Lama, but also the fact that both his mother as well as his folk singer wife, Peng Liyuan, are Buddhists. Some observers even say Peng has come under the tutelage of a Tibetan Buddhist teacher. Would that not suggest she has closer ties with Tibet?

The future of Tibet should exude more than a ray of hope, so these observers keep saying.

But is that so? There is a well-known Confucian saying, “Watch one’s words and then heed one’s deeds.” Since taking the helm last year, over and over Xi has proclaimed he would realize the great Chinese renaissance. He summed all this up as “the Chinese Dream”; reverie it is not.

“What is ‘the Chinese Dream?’” Xi asked before the Chinese Communist Party congress in 2012. “To realize the great renaissance of the Chinese nation is, in my view, our nation’s greatest dream in the modern era. And we’re now getting closer to fulfilling this dream than ever before in our history.”

In the CCP’s tradition, every new leader comes into office with his own agenda. For Deng Xiaoping, it was “Reform and Opening Up.” Jiang Zemin had his “Three Represents.” Hu Jintao harped on “the Harmonious Society.” For Xi, the Chinese renaissance should be it.

So what would the Chinese renaissance entail? For one thing, Xi’s stance on Diaoyu Islands<sup>3</sup> seems unyielding.

Already, observers have noted how Xi has distinguished himself from his predecessors with his emphasis on the Chinese renaissance, which essentially is an expression of nationalism. The Chinese Dream, in other words, is that of a great Chinese empire. One can see no sooner has the sun set on the old imperialist nations than the upstarts rear their heads. For them, territorial sovereignty is first and foremost. They will not give up what is already under their control, and will fight tooth and nail for what is not.

Two cases in point: Since 2012, new passports issued by China are used to broadcast its claims over Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the disputed territories bordering India. And Xi commands the Diaoyu Islands Response Team, overseeing troop deployment, intelligence gathering, diplomacy and marine law enforcement.

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3. Known as Pinnacle Islands in the West and Senkaku Islands for the Japanese. China, Japan, and Taiwan are locked in disputes over these territories in the East China Sea.

Tibetans also have their dream: That is for the Dalai Lama to use his middle-of-the-road approach to achieve a high degree of autonomy for Tibetans, despite their growing desire for independence. However, in the eyes of Chinese leaders, even the modest middle is *de facto* independence, as intolerable as *de jure* independence. Given that sovereignty and territory are both China's core interests, the Tibetan Dream is doomed.

True that Xi has his naysayers, because there are those who deem the Chinese renaissance unattainable so long as the people are denied their heart and soul. Regardless, one thing is clear: Tibetans have no place in the Chinese Dream.

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## Beijing Olympics: Divided World, Divided Dream

For historical reasons, the Amdo region schedules religious ceremonies and popular festivals according to the Chinese lunar calendar. The Beijing Olympics was slated to kick off on August 8, which on the lunar calendar was the eighth day of the seventh month. That also happened to be the first day of a Buddhist ceremony at one of the county's largest monasteries, Labrang Tashi Khyil, which was to host a dance ceremony to entertain both the clerics and the laymen. Even though this tradition goes back more than two centuries, but since its timing clashed with the Beijing Olympics, officials called it off.

Crestfallen, a monk confided in me, "The government gave us a laundry list of bans: Do not leave the monastery; do not assemble; do not protest. More than a hundred plainclothes cops dressed as tourists milled about the monastery for days on end. On top of that, just about every work unit and village nearby sent their people to keep a close eye on us. Even ordinary folks had to show their IDs in order to come in and worship. Alas, if the Chinese could have their Olympics, why couldn't they let us have our ceremony?"

In protest, nearly all Tibetan store owners and restaurateurs in Labrang County (Xiahe in Chinese), home to the monastery and the

historical heart of Amdo, refused to open for business on the opening day of the Games. And many old folks choked back tears as they prayed and circumambulated the monastery.

On August 12, a few days into the Olympics, it was time for the traditional horse racing festival on Sangke grassland in Gannan—an occasion for as many as 10,000 to 20,000 herders to gather and for the much-revered monks to give them blessings. In recent years, the local government has taken over the planning, turning the festival into a *mélange* extravaganza of trade and tourism.

Although herders had already galloped onto the grassland and pitched their tents, once the official edict came down, the festival was called off in a heartbeat.

It was easy to see why. These days, when just about every single Tibetan is treated as a potential terrorist, a gathering of more than ten thousand is inevitably seen as the greatest threat there is. It also did not help that the festival coincided with the Olympics. So local officials, who would rather not be blamed for anything that may go awry, all became disciples of the Deng Xiaoping school of nipping danger in the bud and canceled the festival.

This angered the Tibetans, which in turn put the officials doubly on guard. In the end, Xiahe was all but locked down; no one could go in or get out. Tibetans from the neighboring areas were not allowed to scooter into town, and the grassland was overrun with military police.

I interviewed some Amdo locals and asked what they thought of the Games. One of them was an old Tibetan farmer who was denounced as a rebel and sent to a labor camp in 1958, but now lives in the countryside with his children. “At first, in order to ensure smooth sailing for the Olympics, Beijing agreed to negotiate with the representative of the Dalai Lama’s special envoy Lodi Gyari Rinpoche. But after two rounds the attitudes only got worse,” the old farmer said. “Perhaps because once the issues over hosting the Games were resolved, Beijing could care less. This goes to show you can’t take the Chinese at their word. They flip, and they flop.”

A well-educated middle-aged businessman said his two children were raised in a Han-dominated city. They never realized they were different until the March 14 unrest,<sup>4</sup> during which they were taunted by classmates as “Tibetan separatists.” This experience changed his children tremendously. When they watched the Olympics they cheered on the foreign teams and hoped to see China lose. This made the father both sad and anguished.

A monk who was detained during the unrest, and then brutally beaten, said, “Many people, not only the Tibetans but even the officials, were fearful of the Olympics, as though they were about to face off their mortal enemies on the battlefield. And the Tibetans had more to fear, not least because they were treated as enemies from the outset.”

The Beijing Games were not only politicized but also drove a wedge between ethnic groups—the very opposite of the Olympic spirit. This experience will stay with all those who have suffered humiliation in the name of the Games.

\* \* \*

## The Qinghai-Tibet Railway Conscripted

The Qinghai-Tibet railway went into operation in 2006. The state-of-the-art railcars basked in media spotlight and were touted as the fruit of the collaborative efforts between Chinese and foreign investors. What is little known is that in the spring of 2008, service was suspended briefly to make way for military and munitions transport.

The military purpose of the railway was thus fully realized within two short years of it beginning operations.

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4. It was a series of demonstrations and protests that started in Lhasa on March 14, 2008, presumably as a recollection of the March 1959 uprising by the Tibetans against Chinese rule, but soon spread to other Tibetan areas and a number of monasteries outside the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). Homes and businesses were looted and eighteen civilians were killed, along with one policeman and an untold number of protesters.

At the stroke of midnight on April 25, 2008, countless armed troops escorted 675 Tibetan monks—all masked in black cloth—to Lhasa station. There, they boarded the wobbly wagons of a train bound for Golmud (Ge'ermu in Chinese), the terminus of the railway's Tibet section.

The monks were loaded on the kind of rickety trains no tourists or fortune-seeking visitors to Tibet would ever ride. When a few monks later described their ordeal, I pictured the cattle cars or freight trains in which millions of Jews were ferried to the concentration camps, and on to the crematoria.

While I would rather not tell where I met these monks, I must say this meeting was a miracle that left me beyond despondent. All I want is to tell their stories and expose Beijing's lies about religious freedom.

I was told the monks were snatched from Lhasa's Big Three monasteries—Drepung, Sera, and Gandan. Around midnight, thousands of armed Chinese soldiers barged in, followed by Tibetan police and officials serving as interpreters and accomplices. The actual number of monks arrested far exceeded the reported 675, because at Drepung alone more than 700 monks were rounded up. In addition, more than 400 were snatched from Sera, along with an untold number from Gandan.

So, what happened to those who were not among the 675 hauled off by train?

The monks murmured, "Probably they are languishing in Lhasa's jails. Who knows if they are dead or alive?"

What I know is that, of the fourteen monks who staged a sit-in at the plaza of the Jokhang Temple in March, at least one had already been sentenced to fourteen years in prison.

During detention at a makeshift military jail in Golmud, the monks were subjected to a crash course on "political education" by Tibetan teachers from Tibet University and Tibet Medical College. They schooled the monks in prohibitions and restrictions but absolutely nothing about civil rights. After three months, some of the monks were escorted back to their home province of Qinghai by local police, but they could not go home until after another round of "political education" at a local high

school, and under the watch of plainclothes soldiers. After the Olympics was over in late August, those monks from Amdo and Ngaba counties were sent home under police escort like criminals. None of the monks were allowed to return to their monasteries in Lhasa.

While he was telling me all this, a monk from Sera, who called me “sister,” wore a faint smile, but his face was etched with unfathomable sorrow. He said nearly all the monks fell ill in detention, and most developed a heart condition. An already-ailing twenty-two-year-old monk, Jigme Phuntsok, became sicker within twenty days, after receiving a misdiagnosis by the military doctor, and died. Another thirty-ish young monk could not bear to lie low. He banged his head against the wall and then jumped off a hospital building; he broke his neck and lost hearing in one of his ears.

Another monk who called me “sister,” from Drepung, was still quite young but has already been a *geshe*, the equivalent of a master’s degree in Tibetan Buddhism. He worried about his future away from the monastery. Orphaned at a tender age and has practically no family, he started his clerical career many years ago at Drepung. There are many more monks who had similar experiences.

Now as train after train files past the snow-capped Nyenchen Tanglha, it is obvious the once-mighty mountain god is rendered impotent in a regime where monks are treated as prisoners. I tried to imagine how they felt as they were being carted off in the ramshackle railcars. Truth be told, it beggared my imagination.

Police are stationed along nearly every kilometer of the long Qinghai-Tibet tracks. At the Mt. Tanggula Pass checkpoint, a police officer told me that since last year he has been watching over the tracks, which are already outfitted with a network of surveillance control devices. Nothing can escape such close watch.

## The Next Big One

In the May 29, 2008 issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Robert Barnett of Columbia University and an authority on contemporary Tibet wrote: “Few predicted the intensity of recent events inside Tibet, [but] this is not true of the distinguished Chinese intellectual Wang Lixiong, [who] wrote in 1998: ‘Tibet is more prosperous now than ever before in its history. However, this has not gained the PRC the allegiance of the Tibetans, more and more of whom have become attached to the Dalai Lama. . . . The current stabilization is only on the surface. One day people will riot in much greater numbers than in the late eighties.’”

So now I will continue to prophesize: Next time riots break out in Tibet, the scale will be bigger than in 2008. I can even predict when Tibet will see the next riots. If the Tibet issue sees no progress before the Dalai Lama passes away, and if he is still barred from Tibet, the moment he dies will send out the call to arms for Tibetans within China’s borders.

This is not something Beijing’s crackdown machinery can avert, and there is no way the government can suppress the news. Tibetans will not need to coordinate or be organized; they will all rise up spontaneously.

As anyone who understands Tibet knows, the fate of the Dalai Lama remains an open wound in the heart of every Tibetan. He is the supreme leader of Tibetan Buddhism and a living, breathing bodhisattva. He has made the ultimate sacrifice by entering into a devil’s bargain: He gave up Tibet’s independence in exchange for a high degree of autonomy and for the preservation of Tibetan culture and religion. For all his humility, Beijing has subjected him to endless humiliations. If he were to be barred from his homeland for the rest of his life and never again saw his people and his disciples, who have been pining for his return, the pain would be beyond words.

As long as the Dalai Lama is living, Tibetans can manage to keep their hopes alive, regardless of the ups and downs. But once he is deceased, hope becomes despair, hatred overcomes fear, and bereavement fans fanaticism. The riots at that time will be much larger in scale and scope, and tempt ever more Tibetans. And the situation surely will not calm down in a short time.

Beijing is no stranger to mass protests sparked by a leader's demise. In 1976, the mourning for the respected premier Zhou Enlai ignited unrest. And the funeral of Hu Yaobang in 1989 led to the Tiananmen Square crackdown. The only way the Chinese government can avert the next riots is to resolve the Tibet question during the Dalai Lama's lifetime, or to at least break the current stalemate.

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## The Fall of Lhasa

During China's reform and opening up in the 1980s, Lhasa was the destination for many talented Tibetans. I have seen quite a few young Tibetan graduates who could have remained in Beijing, Shanghai or other cities and found work there, but preferred instead to live and work in Lhasa, far from the bustle and hustle.

In the spring of 1990, I left Kham in Eastern Tibet for Lhasa, the city of my birth, to work for the Tibetan Cultural Association; some of my colleagues were from the Amdo region. At the time, Lhasa was a magnet to Tibetans. Amdo and Kham businessmen flocked here to set up their enterprises. Monks made their pilgrimage to Lhasa and studied at the Big Three monasteries in adherence to tradition. Tibetans from across the regions still regarded Lhasa as the hub. They bought houses to settle into and tried to transfer their household registration to here. Although Lhasa had all kinds of problems then, and for three years straight protests here were met with crackdowns, it still afforded more leeway and possibilities, and was relatively free and tolerant.

How things have changed since. Now two parents who come from Kham to visit their daughter married to a Lhasa local would despair at finding her living in a city at gunpoint. Soldiers rule the streets, and monks face desecration. Lhasa has degenerated from a holy city into a sin city, full of depravity and bloodshed.

Monks from outside Lhasa now must carry proof of their identity and other forms of verification in order to pass through the gauntlet of

checkpoints. Rinpoches from all over the Tibetan regions steer clear of Lhasa and move to mainland China instead. Those who are already here avoid going out, living under virtual house arrest. Local monks exercise caution and try to walk the streets in casual wear as much as possible.

In the heart of Old Lhasa around the Jokhang Temple, one can often see armed police randomly stop monks or youths in Tibetan garb for interrogation and registration. Ordinary Tibetans are on guard with each other, even their own relatives, fearing there may be police informants or spies among them.

Ever fewer foreigners are visiting, and tourists are subject to numerous restrictions. Most foreign foundations and NGOs have been expelled. Tibetans entrepreneurs are either downsizing or relocating their businesses to other Tibetan regions or cities in China; even though they do not find the climate, language and way of life there agreeable, at least they can live in less fear. And since 2008, quite a few successful Tibetans have been sentenced to prison, resulting in paranoia among businessmen and entrepreneurs. No one knows what would happen tomorrow, or if they would lose the wealth they have toiled to build over the past decades to trumped-up charges. . . .

Lhasa's centripetal force on Tibetans seems to be on the wane. That is because everywhere they turn they encounter more difficulties here than elsewhere. For example, even getting a permit or a border pass for pilgrimage has become a pipe dream for many Tibetans. Although a good number of communities have been established throughout Lhasa with a lot of new homes built, many are sitting vacant. Before, Tibetans from Amdo and Kham would look to buy a house in Lhasa; now most Tibetans tend to buy properties in Chengdu, Sichuan's provincial capital. Some say as many as 200,000 Tibetans have already done so, possibly including many who refuse to live in Lhasa's shadow of fear.

No doubt Tibetans in the other provinces also face suppression, but it remains a lot more relaxed there than what goes on here. A case in point: In the summer of 2011, when I traversed the Tibetan regions from Qinghai Province to Sichuan Province, along the way I saw the long-forbidden likeness of the Dalai Lama being worshipped inside monasteries

and laypeople's homes. Over the years, provincial officials have gone from strictly enforcing the ban to turning a blind eye, because they realized iron-fist enforcement would only incite greater resistance. Here in Lhasa this sort of concession is unheard of. On some of the murals that bear his image, officials have asked that a beard be painted—in order to mask the Dalai Lama and befuddle worshippers and tourists alike.

\* \* \*

## Let Go of the Dalai Lama

During the first ever online chat between the Dalai Lama and netizens in China,<sup>5</sup> the question that garnered the most interest was: “What are your thoughts on the two Eleventh Panchen Lamas issue?”

To wit, as another similarly popular question put it more bluntly: “After you pass away, the Chinese Communist Party is bound to appoint your successor. What is your countermeasure?”

“I think the Dalai Lama as an institution does not matter much. The Chinese Communist Party cares a lot more about it than I do,” said the Dalai Lama, with a laugh. “So, it is likely that the two-Panchen phenomenon will arise. And when it does, it'll only add to the confusion and not help the situation.”

The Dalai Lama's response shows he has foreseen the prospect of dueling Dalai Lamas succeeding him, and that it will spell chaos. The Chinese government is not the least bit concerned, because chaos is conducive to its divide-and-rule strategy over the Tibetans. Therefore, creating chaos could be precisely its intent.

So how would the Dalai Lama contend with the chaos?

“In 1969, I made a very formal announcement,” said the Dalai Lama, “that we should let the people of Tibet decide whether or not to continue with the institution of the Dalai Lama. Similarly, in 1992, I've made a formal declaration that once the Tibet issue is resolved, I won't serve in

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5. The chat, which Wang Lixiong helped run, took place in May 2010.

any position in the Tibetan government. All Tibet-related affairs will be managed by the civil servants who remain in Tibet. And since 2001, the head of the Tibet Government in Exile has been democratically elected by Tibetan exiles to a five-year term.”

We can see that in the Dalai Lama’s mind, the easiest way to deal with the two Dalai Lamas chaos is to diminish the institution’s importance to Tibet, and to make the democratized Tibetans the masters of their future and of their destiny.

In other words, the Dalai Lama saw the key to solving the problem. That is why in his remaining years he is focusing his efforts on democratizing the Tibetan society. However, even though Tibetan exiles have made great strides on the road to democracy, little has changed in the status quo that places the Dalai Lama at the center of their universe.

The democratically elected parliament and chief executive are far from being the Dalai Lama’s surrogates. In the long run, it is going to take more efforts to explore and establish a democratic system in order to realize his ideal.

\* \* \*

## Tibetans Are Ruined by Hope

In Tibet, there is a saying at the tip of every tongue: “Tibetans are ruined by hope; Chinese are ruined by suspicion.” Tibetans often say this in self-ridicule, helplessly, hopelessly, or heedlessly. Although they talk the talk with a cauldron of emotions, they continue to lose themselves in a reverie of hope about the future.

The world-renowned Tibetologist, Melvyn Goldstein of Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, whose research on both historical and contemporary Tibet has been widely published, recently co-authored a biography entitled *A Tibetan Revolutionary: The Political Life and Times of Bapa Phüntso Wangye*.<sup>6</sup> Once I opened the book, I found this saying in

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6. Berkeley: University of California, 2004.

the epigraph of the latest work by this scholar, who has spent his career examining the complicated and entwined history of the Chinese and the Tibetans.

Does this saying not hammer home the book's thesis? In other words, does this saying not encapsulate the struggles of Phunwang's life? He was one of the first Tibetans who put their faith in Communism and also among the first to have collaborated with the People's Liberation Army to "liberate" Tibet. Some now say he should not have brought the Communist fox to the chicken coop. But anyone who understands the ideals and aspirations of Phunwang and his contemporaries should know they struggled not for their own gains, but for the greater good of Tibet.

In 2004, Phunwang, already well into his eighties, penned two important letters—one to Chinese president Hu Jintao; the other to the general director of the China Tibetology Research Center and state-appointed Tibetan spokesman Lhagpa Phuntshogs. In his letters, Phunwang urged Beijing to have a dialogue with the Dalai Lama as soon as possible and to allow him to return to his homeland. Phunwang stressed, again and again, that this issue concerned not just the long-term harmony and sustainable development of the Tibetan regions, but also the unity and equality, survival and prosperity of all ethnic groups. Yet, his plea fell on deaf ears. Does this not represent one of the myriad dreams harbored by the Tibetans?

Not long before, I met a Tibetan couple who had settled overseas but visited Lhasa recently. They resented the increasing sinicization of Tibet, but that was not what they found the most disturbing. They were most concerned about those Tibetans, having been co-opted by the regime, who are preoccupied with material pursuit and enjoyment and mired in complacency.

Beijing and the Tibetan Government in Exile had already had five rounds of talks, the couple recalled with much sadness. As there appeared to be a breakthrough, the exile government asked all Tibetans to cease their protests and demonstrations against China. Most of them heeded the call, patiently waiting for the situation to improve. But things have only gone downhill since then, against Tibetans' wishes: The CCP leadership in Tibet declared it was in "mortal combat" with the Dalai Lama.

And the Chinese border guards shot dead a group of fleeing Tibetan pilgrims on the Nangpa La pass near the Nepal-Tibet border in 2006. Clearly, our dreams were once again shattered.

True that Tibetans have too many dreams, and they should not carry on dreaming. Perhaps it is only when dreams are dashed will there be a real breakthrough.

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## **From Self-Immolation to Self-Rule**

Without reservation, I respect all those Tibetans who have set themselves on fire.<sup>7</sup> Although not every one of them has accomplished their goal, and regardless of whether or not they have any clear intent, their collective impact lies in fueling the courage of a people.

For the underdog in particular, courage is a precious resource; more often than not it turns the tables. Self-immolation calls for enormous courage. And it was with courage of an earth-shattering and awe-inspiring kind that the first sixteen Tibetans perished on Chinese soil in self-immolation, culminating with that of Sobha Rinpoche of Golok, in Amdo. I think the goal of working up the courage of the Tibetan people has been accomplished.

So now the question is: What should such precious courage be harnessed for? Carrying on with self-immolations and burning off courage would become too much of a waste from this point on, I believe.

The courage inspired by these martyrs should be used to produce real results. And herein lie their hopes, as well as the value of their sacrifice.

That said, self-immolation still is a form of violence, extreme violence, only that it is done to oneself. Inflicting violence on oneself, other than in desperate protestation or as a last-ditch effort to defend one's dignity, stems from the hope for real impact.

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7. Between March 2011 and August 2013, more than 120 self-immolations were reported.

Just as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. . . . But ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, but not only for ourselves. We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process . . .”<sup>8</sup>

The realization of such hopes is predicated on the existence of conscience. The machine of an authoritarian regime, however, is grounded only on rigid structure and ruthless logic, as well as bureaucratic interests. In 1989, when thousands of young people in Tiananmen Square were on the verge of death from hunger strike, who got any glimpse of the regime’s conscience?

Here lies the limitation of past nonviolent struggles: The outcome is determined not by the resistance but by the regime. The resistance can only apply pressure, but as long as the regime does not give an inch there can be no progress. The tough position in which Tibet now finds itself is inevitable.

So, where is the north star that points the way out of the woods for Tibet? This is a question that, I feel, demands an answer first and foremost. A people who do not know their way can only go about blindly; even such heroic sacrifices as self-immolations can make many people feel ever more desperate. After every self-immolation, emotions stir and arguments rage to no avail.

It would be unfair to say the martyrs have shown much courage but little wisdom. Wisdom is not the cleverness to lie low and stay alive, but the foresight to lead Tibet out of the conundrum. Although that is not something ordinary people should or can undertake, attributing all wisdom to only the Dalai Lama, who has bowed out of politics, is irresponsible. He has already affirmed the principle of nonviolence and the middle-of-the-road course. It is up to the politicians to show the wisdom.

Yet, there has been very little of that. Beijing is waving wads of cash in one hand and brandishing the butcher’s knife in the other. Assuming the Tibetan Government in Exile speaks for the other side, it is unclear besides making statements its representatives know what else to do.

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8. *Strength to Love* (New York: Fortress Press, 1963), 40.

Please tell the brave Tibetans what they can do. If they know, more of them will choose life over self-immolation and the short-lived media attention it garners.

In my view, village self-rule is Tibet's way out. Through the participation of each ordinary villager, the villages could govern themselves. The masses become active participants, no longer passive observers of the endless and fruitless negotiations, or chips in the high-stake political games between Beijing and Dharamsala.

Genuine self-rule should sprout from the grassroots, from the bottom to the upper echelons, with autonomy at every level, all the way for the entire Tibetan regions. As long as grassroots autonomy serves as the starting point, a future of regional autonomy is nigh.

The latest exemplar was in Wukan, Guangdong Province. As Wukan's villagers rose up against illegal land grabs by party officials, they threw in the towel and fled. Each clan elected its own representative, and the representatives voted for members to form the village council. The autonomous council brought not only order to village affairs but also the authorities to the negotiation table, even in the midst of government suppression and a siege by paramilitary troops.

Can Tibetan villagers achieve similar success? Tibetan villages are not lacking in the conditions found in Wukan. Once a village succeeds, Tibetans will have an example to follow. When ten more succeed, the end of the tunnel would be near. When a hundred rise up, a truly autonomous Tibet would become within reach.

I know a familiar refrain from the skeptics: What Hans can do Tibetans cannot; they will face separatism charges and suppression, and so on. But for too long we have given in to all these doubts. The answer is a single question: If you are not afraid of setting yourself on fire, what else can scare you?

A people's courage is certain to be the talisman of their triumph.

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