

## TIBET: MYTH AND REALITY

Lydia Aran

The attempt by the Tibetans last March to link their protest against Chinese occupation to the forthcoming Olympic Games elicited waves of symbolic gestures of solidarity with the victim of Chinese aggression. The recent earthquake in Sechuan, however, which had shifted the role of victim to China, is reported in the press to have caused an immediate and marked decline in the European leaders' willingness to meet the visiting Dalai Lama, notwithstanding his declared sympathy with the victims of the disaster.

The attitude of world leaders and public to the events in our own area have often been as fickle as in the case of the Sino-Tibetan conflict. The case of Tibet, though geographically distant, holds a special interest for the Israelis because it raises moral and political issues connected with occupation, resistance and relations between the occupier and the occupied. Like in the case of Tibet, images, often fictitious, play a role in attitudes and decisions concerning Israel. Looking back at Tibetan history, one is astounded to note the extent to which a mythical and unrealistic image dominates the Western view of Tibet, and the fact that the considerable knowledge now available does not seem to diminish the hold of such image on the Western people. It may be timely, therefore, to correct some errors and biases current in the prevalent view of the Tibetan case.

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The Fourteenth Dalai Lama has been spectacularly successful in making Buddhism one of the great living world religions and a partner in the global religious and intellectual discourse. He has become the most popular, best loved and respected world spiritual leader. Tibetan Buddhism, a religion, which only 50 years ago was an enigma to the outside world, has become the subject of academic studies in Western universities and of innumerable courses, workshops and cultic and study groups throughout the world. Its symbols, some of its practices and items of its vocabulary, have become part of the vocabulary, dress and way of life of millions. Its philosophy and techniques have had a significant influence on Western medicine, psychology, education and arts. The infusion of ideas, insights and techniques of Tibetan Buddhism into the cultural life of the West has enriched it not only by offering alternative paths of spiritual life but also, perhaps mainly, by stimulating critical re-examination of the accepted assumptions and paradigms in religious, intellectual and scientific thought and practices.

The phenomenal success of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture in the West was – ironically – the result of Tibet's disappearance from the political map of the world. Tibet emerged into the consciousness of the Western world only after the country had been invaded and occupied by the People's Republic of China in 1950, and especially after its spiritual and temporal leader, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, escaped to India, followed by several hundred thousand other Tibetans, in 1959. It was then that out of the ruins of the desecrated and pillaged monasteries and the cries of the thousands of victims of Chinese aggression, there arose a new Tibet: the Tibetan Diaspora, its center in the Himalayan hill station of Dharamsala in North India.

As Tibet was being brutally cleansed by its Communist occupiers of the vestiges of their traditional ways of life and worship, the Diaspora was gaining ever more interest and support among the liberal Western public, and branching out to other parts of India, then to Europe and America, establishing settlements, monastic centers, retreats and support groups around the globe.

Originally, the Tibetan Government in Exile saw itself above all as the vanguard of the Tibetan struggle for independence. This called for translating traditional Tibetan nationalism, which, like in all pre-modern societies, had been based mainly on ethnic and religious identities, into a modern concept of a nation-state, i.e. a unitary political entity, entitled by common ethnicity, culture and history, to self-rule over its own territory, within internationally recognized political borders. Tibet had not been a politically or culturally unified state since the end of its imperial period in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, the ethnically Tibetan areas comprised several semi-states, the largest among them and the only one with a centralized administration being - in the last 300 years - the Dalai Lama's state in Central Tibet, covering the area (1.2 million sq.km.) of the present Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), though even there, the extent of the Dalai Lama's and his dominant Gelug-pa order's authority varied with distance from Lhasa and fluctuated with time. Different regions were divided by political and sectarian affiliations and loyalties, sometimes mutual tensions, and most of their regional dialects were mutually unintelligible.

The process of retrospective nation-building by the Tibetan Diaspora found an unexpected but effective partner in the young generation of the 1960s and 70s Europeans, disgusted with the hypocrisy and cynicism of Western regimes and established religions and longing for a new paradigm of society, based on moral rather than political principles. The then current fantastic, unrealistic image of Tibet seemed to them to offer an attractive alternative to all that was wrong at home. It was vague enough to serve as a screen on which the Counter-Culture and later New-Age believers could project their own longings and dreams. Reduced to a few adjectives, it became a kind of eternal truth, detached from history, territory, time and change. It marked the birth of a de-contextualized, de-territorialized orientalist fantasy, often referred to as the Shangri-la myth, referring to the 1933 James Hilton's novel (later film), *LOST HORIZON*, a fable of a spiritual community hidden in a Himalayan valley, where treasures of (Western) civilization are stored until the time when good triumphs over evil.

This myth stereotypes Tibet as a sanctuary of an imperiled ancient wisdom and a unique spiritual culture, which it is the duty of the West to save, this culture being a universal asset and the last hope for the rescue of the West from the ills of its civilization. The Tibetans appear in it as simple, poor, inherently non-violent and deeply religious people, ruled by an emanation of the Buddha in accordance with the Mahayana Buddhist tenets of benevolence, compassion and sanctity of all life.

It was natural for the leadership of the Tibetan Diaspora, troubled, like many other refugee communities, by identity crisis and internal dissent, to adopt the stereotype and to project it on the past. First of all, it helped to bridge over differences within the refugee community, reflecting the significant divisions between cultures, languages, political and sectarian affiliations and loyalties in different regions of traditional Tibet. Moreover, a model blurring these divisions was essential in the process of inventing a

unitary Tibetan nation and a pan-Tibetan culture, which became subsequently known and venerated in the West as the “**Tibetan Cultural Heritage**” (TCH).

The second task which the Tibetan Diaspora under the leadership of the Dalai Lama set itself was mobilization of international support for the Tibetan cause. In this the Tibetan Diaspora leadership had only partial success. The Dalai Lama’s stature as spiritual leader helped him to elicit world-wide popular sympathy with the plight of the Tibetan people and to mobilize support for the refugee community. The Dalai Lama’s use of Buddhism for recruiting support or protection is not without precedent in Tibetan history. Trading religious services and spiritual guidance for political, military and material protection has been the hallmark of Tibetan relations with the Mongol and later Manchu rulers of China since 13<sup>th</sup> century, and it is at the base of the present Dalai Lama’s relations with the rich, the powerful and the glamorous of the world. However, his connections and popularity, while helpful in internationalization of the ‘Tibetan question’, eliciting support for the refugee community and symbolic gestures of solidarity with the Tibetan cause, failed to produce even nominal support for Tibetan independence, or affect China’s brutal and discriminatory policies in the Tibetan areas of the PRC.

Subsequently, the Dalai Lama formally renounced his demand for independence in favor of “genuine autonomy” (in his appearance before the European Parliament in Strasbourg on June 15, 1988 and then on many other occasions). Somewhat later, reflecting the position of his Western followers, for whom the problem of Tibet as an independent or autonomous nation is less relevant than that of Tibet as a repository of the secret wisdom necessary to save the self-destructive West, the Dalai Lama announced that ...”while the loss of independence might be considered, the extinction of the Tibetan Buddhist spirituality is inconceivable. The preservation of the Tibetan Cultural Heritage has become my life’s task (Le Monde, 30 October, 1996)

What is the “Tibetan Cultural Heritage” and how Tibetan is its Dharamsala version? How does the Dalai Lama’s success in diffusion of Buddhism and “preservation of the TCH” promote the cause of Tibet? What *is* the cause of Tibet? And finally, how does the Tibetan Diaspora, its values, policies, strategies and achievements relate to the lives of the estimated 97 percent of the Tibetan people who live under Chinese rule in People’s Republic of China?

It has become customary in contemporary general use in the West to refer to the TCH and Tibetan Buddhism as synonymous or at least overlapping. Buddhism was brought to Tibet from India beginning in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. In the following centuries, especially after the disintegration of the Tibetan empire in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Tibetans blended indigenous and imported cultural elements into what has become a religious-social-cultural system known as Tibetan Buddhism and in contemporary Western idiom as the Tibetan Cultural Heritage. By 11<sup>th</sup> century Tibetan Buddhism branched off into several monastic orders or lineages, which soon accumulated great wealth, wrestled power from princes and became rivals for political hegemony in Tibetan areas. The present Dalai Lama, the spiritual head of all Tibetan Buddhists and now the head of the Tibetan Government in Exile, is the latest link in the lineage of Gelug-pa, which ruled Tibet from mid-17<sup>th</sup> century until 1959.

The specifically Tibetan feature of Tibetan Buddhism is its shamanic component, mainly the use of psycho-dynamic consciousness-altering techniques, including visualization and identification with deities, believed to confer on accomplished practitioners power to mediate contact with divine powers or even directly affect reality. Some scholars see in it one of the great psychological achievements of humanity.

The TCH has undergone in the Diaspora a considerable transformation. First, it gradually incorporated elements, which, while of great concern to Western audiences, have never been part of traditional Tibetan culture, e.g. issues such as non-violence, concern with environment, human rights, world peace and the like. Secondly, it “universalized” the Buddhist doctrine by shedding its specifically Tibetan (mainly shamanic) features; by weeding out esoteric and ritual elements; by “ethicizing” it and adapting it to the Western needs and tastes. In other words, incorporating much of the Buddhist modernist agenda.

Buddhist modernism was not known in Tibet. The Dalai Lama adopted it in the late 1960s, while in exile in India, along with the Tolstoy-Gandhi-Luther King style of non-violence and willingness to dispense with elements of Buddhist cosmology which conflicted with scientific rationality. Couched in Western vocabulary, it became part of contemporary Tibetan Buddhist agenda for Western consumption. The Dalai Lama’s rhetoric on world peace, environment and human rights owes also much to the influence of the International Buddhist Groups – a range of contemporary international Buddhist organizations, which try to contribute to solution of today’s world problems, above all violence and materialism, through deployment of Buddhist values.

Gradually, national struggle for independent or autonomous Tibet has given way to an amorphous agenda of environmental, pacifistic, spiritual and global issues of concern to the liberal Western world, which has had increasingly less and less to do with Tibet’s real problems. Along with this, as Tibet is becoming increasingly identified among its Western supporters and general public, with the (rewritten) TCH, embodied in the Dalai Lama, the latter tends to replace the real Tibet under occupation, which has had its soul - so to speak - removed to Dharamsala. In any case, focus on TCH and the Dalai Lama is definitely diverting attention and resources from the real Tibet and its problems.

The Dalai Lama’s success in diffusion of Buddhism throughout the Western world has been a great achievement for him and a gain for the West. But how did it advance the cause of Tibet? True, many converts to Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, in the West, have become supporters of Tibet. But experience has shown that most they can do is to irritate the Chinese leadership, certainly not to make it relax its hold on Tibet.

The Shangri-la stereotype has no currency among Tibetans living within the boundaries of PRC, who make up over 95 percent of all Tibetans. What, according to observers in Lhasa, truly bothers most Tibetans under Chinese occupation is not so much the absence of political independence, or even cultural or religious freedom. What they bitterly resent is, above all, the Chinese repressive and discriminatory policies, which make most Tibetans victims rather than beneficiaries of the rapid Chinese-style economic development, which, though impressive in terms of capital investment in

infrastructure, industry and services, favors urban areas and benefits mainly the Han and Hui Chinese immigrant population (by now more than half of the urban population of TAR), with whom most Tibetans are by temperament, training, cultural conditioning and, above all, due to discrimination in educational and occupational opportunities, unable to compete. Tibetans protest then, above all, against their discrimination in access to services and resources, such as education, health services, housing, employment and capital, which condemns them to endemic poverty and marginalizes them in their own country.

It is not true that Tibetans object to modernization. It is mainly outsiders who deplore the modernization of Tibet as an erosion of the country's distinctiveness. Tibetans in Lhasa do not object to modernization but they want to share its benefits rather than to be its victims. Personally, I find it rather offensive to recommend primitive way of life to other people, whatever the intention, or asking for post-consumer, eco-conscious behavior in a poor, pre-consumer society.

With regard to modernization, the situation in the Diaspora seems to have many features in common with that in the China-ruled Tibet. In both, there emerges a new and growing class of modern, educated people, independent of lama domination, who profit from association with the Westerners or the Chinese respectively. Growing numbers of young educated Tibetan refugees dream not of return to Lhasa but of a career in Europe or the US. Growing numbers of young Tibetans leave Lhasa for education and career in Beijing. In Lhasa as in Dharamsala, young people tend to be drawn to Western style entertainment and in both, rapid change and exposure to different life-styles produce their crop of anomie and demoralization.

It's hard to tell whether Western popular support for Tibet will survive the demise of the present Dalai Lama. However, interest in the Dharamsala version of the TCH, though only tenuously linked to the "Tibetan cause", seems to be meeting the needs of so many Western people that it is probably here with us to stay.