China and the Future of Tibet

His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet

Recently a flood of articles on Tibet has appeared in the New York Times and other newspapers throughout the world. Many of these articles contain patently false information about the situation in Tibet and the position of the Tibetans in exile. I feel, therefore, that it is time I contributed a brief article toward clearing up some of these misconceptions.

Tibet is geographically, racially, and culturally different from China. Historically, too, Tibet has always been an independent country and has never been "an integral part of China." The very fact that it has to be referred to now as "part of China" is a clear indication of its separate independent status in the past. If it had always been a part of China, what was the need of changing the boundaries in the maps of Central Asia prepared after 1959? Another indication of Tibet's independent status is the great pains taken by the Chinese Communists in explaining to the Tibetans the status of Tibet. They make a distinction between China and "The Middle Kingdom": Tibet is not a part of China, but it is under the Middle Kingdom, just as China is. Tibet and China, they explain, enjoy equal status, and both are parts of the Middle Kingdom.

After the signing of the seventeen-point "Agreement" when the first Tibetan delegation, headed by Kalon T.T. Liushar, called on Mao Tse-tung, the latter told Kalon Liushar: "Now that Tibet has returned to the motherland, Peking is your city, Shanghai is your city...." To this Silon Lukhangwa, my then prime minister, later remarked in Lhasa: "We do not want Peking or Shanghái; give us back Chamdo." Chamdo, the third largest city in Tibet, was kept under military administration by the Chinese from the time of their invasion until the establishment of the Preparatory Committee for the Autonomous Region of Tibet.

In the official documents Tibetans enjoy the same rights as the Chinese, but when it comes to implementation the Tibetans are treated as second-class citizens in their own country. Tibetans have been forcibly recruited in labor gangs to construct roads, military installations, and buildings. Hundreds of schools have also been built, but refugees who still manage to trickle out maintain that these cannot be called Tibetan schools, as only a little Tibetan is taught in the beginning grades. The rest of the curriculum consists of Chinese language and history, basic arithmetic, and manual labor. The thousands of kilometers of roads constructed since the Chinese takeover are not much use to the Tibetans, since there is no public transportation. Improvement has also been made in agricultural output. But according to refugees, at the time of harvest most of the grain is taken away by the Chinese as "Surplus Grain Tax," "State Grain Tax," "Commune Development Tax," "War Preparation Tax," etc. The Tibetans are left with a meager ration of between ninety to 120 kilograms of barley per person per year.

It is for these reasons that the Tibetan Communists, who had been most enthusiastic in the beginning, became disillusioned by about 1956. Eventually many of them openly resented the Chinese actions in Tibet. The result was that most of the Tibetan Communists were dismissed from their official posts and quietly deported to China.

We admit that the social and governmental system of the past in Tibet was neither faultless nor suited to the changing times. But Tibetans were prepared to change of their own accord. Even before 1959 I brought about some reforms, but the Chinese were not happy when we started to do these on our own. They did not give their blessings. They wanted to reap the maximum benefit out of the reforms they were planning to carry out, and our action was endangering this prospect. Tibetans in exile are still for gradual modernity and change. With these aspirations in mind I promulgated in 1963 the draft of a constitution for a future Tibet. I have also said in an official statement a few years ago that the rule of the Dalai Lama may or may not continue in a future Tibet, and that we might even adopt socialistic systems. We are, therefore, not against change or reform.

There is no doubt that China has made tremendous progress since the Communist takeover. The masses
have also benefitted from this. I admit that even in Tibet they have brought about many changes that were necessary but that might not have been possible for us to carry out. But at what cost and sacrifice have they achieved this? In terms of human lives and freedom, which we cherish so sacredly, the sacrifices have been tremendous and terrible, to say the least.

What has happened very often is this: In order to meet certain targets and to please higher authorities Chinese officials have adopted every means, fair or foul, and have completely failed to take into account the sufferings and feelings of the people, who in most cases have to pretend they are happy even when they are not. The most unfortunate part of this process has been that the high officials were quite oblivious to what had actually happened on the spot and accepted unquestioningly the reports of their subordinates, even when they contained absolutely untrue statements. For example, while a certain section of the population might have strongly resented the implementation of a project, the report might say that the people wholeheartedly joined the People’s Liberation Army and the party in its implementation.

About fifty thousand Tibetans, including myself, who left the country in 1959 had already experienced nine years of Chinese rule in Tibet. All those years I tried to reach an amicable solution with the Chinese, because otherwise the inevitable result would have been an open clash between the Tibetan people and the Chinese troops, in which case the former would unquestionably be in a disadvantageous position. Unfortunately, the situation deteriorated so fast that all my efforts were in vain, and the open clash did take place in March, 1959, with predictable results.

The tragedy of Tibet is that a whole race, a people strongly opposed to foreign domination, has been subjugated, oppressed, and gobbled up by China. This has happened not only to Tibet but also to Mongolia and Eastern Turkistan (Sinkiang). It may not sound right for me to speak of these two other countries that are in a similar situation, but I happen to know the true feelings and the national aspirations of these people. Their feelings of resentment against Chinese domination are no less than those of the Tibetans.

To make it easier to devour the invaded nations the Chinese try to cut it up into pieces. They persist, for example, in dividing Tibet into two parts: Inner and Outer Tibet. Historical facts and existing realities mean nothing to them. In all their propaganda they mean only Outer Tibet when they say “Tibet,” or, more officially, “The Autonomous Region of Tibet.” This means the cutting away of about half of Tibet’s territory, and about two-thirds of our population. In this part of Tibet—the Inner Tibet—we have the Amdo and the Kham provinces, which traditionally were inseparable from the rest of Tibet. No Tibetan or learned scholar on Tibet can imagine Tibet or Tibetans without the Amdo and the Kham provinces. The whole of Tibet, without this mythical distinction, has suffered under the invasion of Communist China and has been determined in its struggle against the unjust foreign domination. In fact it was in the eastern part of Tibet, which the Chinese call Inner Tibet, that the initial sporadic revolts against the Chinese occupation took place. Thus the Tibetan resistance movement has often been mislabeled a Khampa resistance movement. Even recently there have been reports that desperate acts of fighting and sabotage are being carried out in these regions. Another clear indication of continued Tibetan resistance and failure on the part of the Communist Chinese to win over the Tibetans is the lack of any prominent Tibetan from among the younger generation to toe their line—a
It is well known that the Chinese have made a similar arbitrary demarcation in the case of Mongolia.

The struggle to free ourselves was and is a Tibetan initiative and a Tibetan movement. In the process of our struggle we have welcomed external help whenever it did not go against our basic goal, and have shunned it whenever it did. But because our struggle is just and we believe in it, it could not and cannot be abandoned even if no help came at all.

Some parties persist in calling the Tibetans in exile "a handful of reactionary cliques." (Some have given the figure of fifteen thousand.) To me this need never be a subject of controversy. India and all other countries where there are Tibetan refugees are open societies. The truth or falsehood of our claim that there are "about a hundred thousand refugees" can easily be verified by visiting these places.

The world has now seen how unpredictable and inconsistent the Chinese are through the vicissitudes of Liu Shao-Ch'i, Lin Piao, Teng Hsiao-p'ing, and, more recently, the "Gang of Four." These changes are unprincipled and conducted at the whim of a few individuals. One can imagine how much the Tibetans have also suffered through such vicissitudes under the Chinese rule.

The Chinese have recently extended an "invitation" to the Tibetans in exile, including myself, to return home. When the offer became known, a number of newspapers hinted that it might be "profitable" for me to return now. Some even informed their readers that some sort of secret and indirect negotiation was going on between my representatives and the Chinese leaders.

These rumors confirm that people in the West have totally misunderstood the true nature of our struggle. The issue is not whether the Dalai Lama and the hundred thousand refugees would be able to return to Tibet. The reason we appeal to other nations is not because we want to go back and the Chinese are not allowing us in. It is not that I long for some of the privileges I used to enjoy and am bitter with the Chinese for having reduced me to the status of refugee. The Chinese have been asking us to return since the end of 1963. Most of their offers have been regularly broadcast on Radio Lhasa and through printed leaflets. There has been no response from our side on this issue because this is not the real issue. The real issues are the feelings and welfare of the six million Tibetans still in Tibet. Why should an alien rule be forced upon them? Why should they not have the choice of holding their own beliefs, traditions, culture, and identity?

If those six million Tibetans were really happy and contented, we would be prepared to return and accept whatever status the majority of them are prepared to grant us. But first it should be established to the total satisfaction of all the Tibetans in exile that the Tibetans in Tibet are completely satisfied with their lot. This is the only prerequisite. There is no question whatsoever of "secret negotiations" to make it possible for me to return. So far, what the Chinese have claimed either directly or through a few selected visitors has not succeeded in convincing us. Some of these visitors have always been uncritical admirers of the "Chinese Revolution." They make their living out of reporting firsthand news from China and commenting on it. How can they be expected to say anything that would conceivably jeopardize their chances of obtaining more Chinese visas in the future? Fortunately, some of the recent visitors have tried to give an objective account of their visits to Tibet, and I hope there are more and more such visitors in the future.

Despite many difficulties, we have been getting information about the conditions inside Tibet. We consider this to be of utmost importance, because we must act according to the wishes of the majority of our people.

In fact it would be a reassuring sign to us if the Chinese Government stopped being selective about whom to invite. It would also be encouraging if the visitors' itinerary were not confined to Lhasa and its immediate vicinity. Some of the recent visitors have claimed to have traveled "throughout Tibet." But none of them mentioned the names of these other places, nor did they describe those regions. It is rather difficult for us to take their word for it.

In short, what is needed is what I have constantly been demanding: an internationally supervised plebiscite—both inside and outside Tibet—to determine whether the Tibetans in Tibet are happy. The plebiscite should be conducted throughout Tibet and it should also include its investigative body people who can understand and speak Tibetan so that they need not have to depend solely on Chinese interpreters. It might even include one or two Tibetans, who do not have to be selected or recommended by me. I am prepared to accept whatever verdicts and recommendations issue from such a plebiscite.