Human Rights for Tibetan Americans: No Small Questions

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A few months ago President Carter's human rights stature took a dive when the Department of State rejected the requests of a group of American citizens to have "Tibet," instead of China, listed as their birthplace on their U.S. passports. The decision came on the heels of an announcement that Zbigniew Brzezinski would be visiting China a few weeks later.

Despite the president's repeated assertions about his impartial application of human rights to all nations, the administration has been silent when it comes to human rights violations by the People's Republic of China. Evidently Washington does not want to offend Peking and thus lets China dictate, at least indirectly, an internal policy decision of the United States. The action by the State Department regarding American citizens of Tibetan origin has carried this unequal application of human rights principles to an absurd degree.

As one Tibetan affected by the ruling said, "Labeling a Tibetan Buddhist as having his origins in Communist China is like saying the homeland of a Jew is Auschwitz." Unfortunately political expediency takes precedence over the moral integrity that the present administration claims to uphold. It also takes precedence over historical truth.

Lobsang and Namlha Samden and their two children are most poignantly affected by the recent passport decision. Months ago, when they applied for passports listing "Tibet" as their birthplace, they assumed that a favorable decision would soon be forthcoming and went ahead with their plans to make an extended visit with Mrs. Samden's ailing mother in India. They sold their house, left their jobs, and now they are stranded. They have to decide whether to abandon their plans or begin a legal or legislative process to get their passports corrected. Mr. Samden is the older brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people.

As recently as September, 1976, an American of Tibetan origin was permitted to list "Tibet" as his birthplace. But, in an unannounced change of policy sometime after that, the Passport Office decided that only "China" could appear. Mr. Ngawang Phakchok, an American of Tibetan origin living in Pennsylvania, applied for a passport in August, 1977, and received one stamped "China," despite his written preference for "Tibet." He refused the passport for reasons that were given in an Op-Ed piece in the New York Times of February 18: "I came to India in 1959 as a Tibetan refugee. I came to the United States as a Tibetan, and all records show Tibet as my birthplace, not China. When I became a United States citizen, my birthplace was recorded as Tibet, not China. I just simply cannot bear a passport that indicates my place of birth as China; this is simply not true because when I was born in Tibet in 1943, there was not even a single Chinese in Tibet. Furthermore, the Chinese occupied my country, killed my parents, relatives, and my fellow countrymen. Therefore, the last thing I want in the world is to have 'China' as my place of birth. The Chinese and Tibetans are culturally, linguistically, and racially two different people. I do not speak Chinese nor do I have any characteristics that will qualify me as Chinese."

Subsequently the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal published editorials registering their support of Mr. Phatchok's position.

Yet another human rights question deserves urgent support. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has had numerous standing invitations to visit this country since the Sixties. But he has not been able to do so. As the Wall Street Journal noted (February 3): "The State Department is still having trouble finding a place amidst all the glitter for Tibet's Dalai Lama....The State Department is worried that any such sign of our hospitality would antagonize the Chinese, who now occupy Tibet."

These and other issues stem from the gradual infiltration of the Chinese into Tibet during the Fifties and then the violent overthrow of the Tibetan Government in 1959, which caused eighty thousand Tibetans, includ-
ing the Dalai Lama, to flee to neighboring countries. In 1960, after conducting an exhaustive inquiry into the Tibetan situation, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) charged the People's Republic of China with committing genocide in Tibet. The Legal Enquiry Committee on Tibet found that many acts of religious persecution had occurred. In particular, it made the finding that the crime of genocide, as defined in international law, had been committed against the Tibetans as a religious group and that this had been accomplished by (1) the killing of religious figures and (2) the forcible transfer of children to China. The Committee used as a yardstick the Genocide Convention of 1948 adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Many other acts are revealed in the ICJ's publication Tibet and the Chinese People's Republic 1960. These acts have been designed to eradicate all forms of religious belief and practice in Tibet. Many monasteries have been destroyed or converted into Chinese military or governmental establishments. To cite an example: Ganden Monastery, the third largest monastery in Tibet, was razed during the Cultural Revolution. This monastery was founded in 409 by Tsong-kha-pa, one of the greatest Tibetan religious scholar-saints.

Tibetans are deprived of their fundamental human rights. There is no freedom of expression and opinion, no freedom of movement, no freedom of communication between separated families. There is denial of the right to self-government through freely elected representatives responsible to the people. The Tibetans are reduced to a minority and are second-class citizens in their own country. Peking calls Tibet a "paradise on earth." If that is true, why do Tibetans still flee their country, and why are visitors to Tibet so carefully selected and escorted?

Nineteen years have passed since the Chinese Army conquered Tibet. Today, when colonialism is fast disappearing from the face of the earth, it is China's colony. Some recent visitors to Tibet saw the signs of Chinese imperialism in Tibet. Professor Edward N. Luttwak, associate director of the Washington Center of Foreign Policy Research at Johns Hopkins, wrote after visiting China and Tibet: "As in Tibet, Chinese rule in the region is in every respect a colonial phenomenon, with an astonishing conformity to type except in one critical respect. Unlike the British in India or Africa, or even the French, the Chinese obviously can see no virtue in the survival of the local cultures, and still less in the survival of local religion. Chinese colonialism is therefore oppressive not merely politically but also culturally." Luttwak added: "I asked a Chinese official resident in Tibet since 1960 how to say 'please' and 'thank you' in Tibetan. He did not know. I asked him to translate, 'move,' 'go,' and 'faster.' He knew."

Americans have already gone out of their way to flatter the Chinese. Two U.S. presidents have paid visits to Peking, and U.S. secretaries of state have gone to Peking on many occasions. What have the Chinese done? No Chinese official even equal to a U.S. secretary of state has visited this country. Why is Washington so hesitant to make demands? Might Washington at least propose such human rights as free travel in Tibet and China for Americans, the freedom for native Tibetans and Chinese to visit the U.S. as individuals, and freedom for native Tibetans and Chinese to practice their religion?

Sir Algernon Rumbold, British deputy under secretary of state from 1958 to 1966, has said, regarding people born in Tibet in or after 1959 and now in the United States, that "it would be reasonable to expect the State Department to avoid being rigid and unkind to these refugees from oppression. Could not they make a genuflection on this passport question to the United Nations' resolution of October 1959 which referred to the Tibetans' fundamental human rights and to 'their distinctive cultural and religious life,' and for which the United States voted?"

The issue of the passports of Americans of Tibetan origin is gaining support among members of the House and Senate. We hope they will see the situation clearly and impose upon the Department of State the rule that Tibetan Americans will not be made to bear a label entirely distasteful to them. Like the Latvians and other refugee groups that have won the right to bear passports that do not legitimize the conquests of their oppressors, this small minority too will be able to list its rightful birthplace. It is no small question, if you are a Tibetan-American, and it should be no small question to others who care about human rights.