

# Tibetans Wait for China's Next Move

Kesang Tseten

**I**t has been twenty years since the Tibetan uprising. Last March, Tibetans and their American supporters rallied outside the United Nations building to commemorate that uprising against Chinese troops occupying the Tibetan homeland.

Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union and honorary president of the International League for Human Rights, was there calling for support of resolutions passed three times by the U.S. General Assembly, in 1959, 1961, and 1965. The U.S. called "for respect for the fundamental human rights of the Tibetan people and for their right to self-determination." The rally, Baldwin said, was to protest the "subjection of six million people to foreign rule" and to uphold "the right to live in your own house." The nonagenarian champion of civil liberties expressed some hope: "It may be that autonomy, semi-independence in Tibet, may be granted when China settles down into the modernization it seeks."

In 1950 the victorious Chinese Communists turned toward Tibet, making a military incursion into that then peaceful and independent country. Threatened by its powerful neighbor, the Tibetan Government signed a seventeen-point agreement, which was to be cited again and again in support of Chinese claims to suzerainty. But the agreement, which promised noninterference in Tibetan matters, did not stop the Chinese from serious meddling in Tibetan affairs. The Tibetans were forced to fight back.

What followed is history. The first to resist were the Khampas from eastern Tibet. They were to carry on a guerrilla war against the Chinese for another two decades in the Himalayan passes of northern Nepal. Mostly nomadic, these inhabitants of the province of Kham are known to be fierce and proud people who put their freedom before everything else.

The fighting gradually spread westward until, on a beautiful spring day in March, the urban dwellers of Lhasa, or the "Land of Gods," abandoned their daily

activities and angrily arose, armed with any weapon they could find: stones, sticks, or metal objects from their homes. On that fateful day the Dalai Lama, then only twenty-three, rose at 5 A.M. He had slept badly. He made his way immediately to the peaceful, familiar prayer-room with its butter lamps and altar bowls filled with golden-colored saffron water. Following prayers and meditation he did what he enjoyed most, taking a stroll in his private gardens. Among the poplars, the willows in bud, and the lotus leaves, he later said, "I soon forgot my worries in the beauty of the spring day."

The worries had to do with General Tan Kuan-San, commander of the Chinese army camp at Lhasa, who had insisted that the Dalai Lama attend a theatrical performance at the Chinese camp. What was unusual about the invitation was the secrecy involved and the insistence that the Dalai Lama attend with a few cabinet ministers but no bodyguards. Should he accept this extremely suspicious invitation? How would the Chinese respond if he did not comply?

But the youthful leader of Tibet did not make that decision. The citizens of Lhasa and the Khampas, who had come westward, had heard about the extraordinary invitation and its clear affront to the Dalai Lama. Tension rose and crowds gathered. Soon thousands surrounded the Dalai Lama's summer palace, the Norbulinka, to stop the Chinese from getting close to him. These people were convinced that there was some sort of Chinese plot and they were going to stop it if they could.

That was how the revolt was triggered. The Chinese crushed it in a few months. Courage alone could not defeat a superior machine. The Chinese, now complete victors, began their program of "liberation" of a land that was not theirs, of a people that did not seek it.

On March 17, 1959, the Dalai Lama left his summer palace with a small entourage of government officials and bodyguards. It had been an agonizing decision to make. He wrote later that he still could not be certain he had done the correct thing. Wearing a maroon-colored chuba, the cap pulled over his eyes, he slung a rifle over

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KESANG TSETEN, a Tibetan living in the United States, is a freelance writer.

his shoulder to complete his disguise. Two weeks later the Dalai Lama and his group arrived at the Indian border, weary but safe. They had survived the arduous journey—traveling on horseback, dzo-back (a crossing of a yak and a cow, common in Tibet), and on foot—over altitudes as high as nineteen thousand feet. Thousands of Tibetans followed and settled in Bhutan, Nepal, and India. Other thousands tried to flee but died in the high and lonely Himalayan snowpasses.

The appeals to the United Nations that followed had some results, at least on paper. But Peking ignored the U.N. and, as years went by, the possibility of Tibet regaining its independence seemed increasingly remote.

Since the normalization of relations between China and the United States, Tibetans in the United States and elsewhere have been raising questions about the future of Tibet. What effect, if any, will this new situation and, more important, the apparent liberalization occurring in China have on the so-called "Autonomous Region of Tibet"? Will China agree to some sort of compromise with refugees who have been in exile for twenty years? Is genuine autonomy for the Tibetans possible? Do Tibetan refugees want a compromise? Under what conditions would they return to Tibet? In short, is a new Tibet on its way, and what might it look like?

After twenty years in exile Tibetans are beginning to understand modern politics. There was a time when they naively thought the United Nations or some sympathetic nation could help Tibet regain its freedom. Gradually, they have come to know about *Realpolitik*, about the economic motives of nations, about power relations, and so on. Many now seriously wonder whether it might not be more practical to seek autonomy from the Chinese, rather than to clamor for what appears to be the remote goal of independence.

Whereas Tibetans feel confident that there will be some relaxation in Tibet, opinions differ as to whether this would lead to real autonomy. Most are not sure that the Chinese will, in fact, make an overture to the Tibetans in exile. But they are open to it. A few are more skeptical: "If the Chinese do want to compromise, it would be because they have something to gain. And we don't know what that is."

Autonomy is the status already accorded to Tibet in theory since 1965. The U.S. Government document titled *People's Republic of China Administration Atlas* states: "The granting of autonomy represents merely the recognition of ethnic minority groups, together with the appointment of their local leaders, in a way that assures effective political control. Self-administration rather than self-determination is the basic concept involved. All autonomous units, regardless of the administrative level, are totally integrated into the regular centralized administrative hierarchy. They...differ only in that concessions are made to local minority customs and languages and that minority cadres are integrated into the administrative structure."

The kind of autonomy that might be acceptable to

Tibetans is complete self-rule in Tibet—with the Chinese controlling external policies. Further, Tibetans and most observers believe that even the Chinese brand of autonomy has not been implemented in Tibet. Pro-China visitors to Tibet, such as the British journalist Neville Maxwell, have conceded that the Chinese overwhelmingly occupy the higher administrative posts in Tibet, as in a colonial structure.

Chunden, in her early forties, is the daughter of a former high-ranking government official in Lhasa. She is now a social worker in Cleveland. She is among a small number of Tibetans who are living in countries other than India, Bhutan, and Nepal. Like many Tibetan refugees, she has relatives whom she has not seen since she fled Tibet in 1959. But her hope of seeing them often turns into apprehension. "You can't be certain about China—things go back and forth unpredictably."

She thinks Tibetans will be affected by changes going on in China. Will China try to reach some sort of compromise with the Tibetan refugees? "It's possible," Chunden said. She indicated that Tibetans should be willing to compromise with the Chinese and not be "political die-hards." Chunden is for a practical approach. "If a compromise is possible, we shouldn't reject it.... In ten or fifteen years, Tibet could be sufficiently autonomous, and comparable to Yugoslavia vis-à-vis the Soviet Union."

Like many of the Tibetans with whom I spoke, Chunden sees the possibility of negotiation between Peking's more liberal leadership and the Tibetan exile community, mostly settled in India. But she is not sure how many Tibetans would return to their homeland on the roof of the world. "There will always lurk the fear that things might change for the worse." Does she think the Dalai Lama would be ready to settle for a compromise with the Chinese? "The Dalai Lama is not anti-Communist. But being the leader of exiled Tibetans, he might take the position that full independence is what we seek," said Chunden.

Seventy-year-old Tsepon Shakabpa, former finance minister of Tibet and author of *A Political History of Tibet*, is one of the very few Tibetan scholars who traveled outside of Tibet before 1959. Accordingly, he was selected to make Tibet's plea at the United Nations General Assembly. "There is a great chance for Tibetan independence with all these political changes in China, and their loosening up, which we have welcomed," said Shakabpa in a general appraisal of the Tibetan situation.

How does he feel about the question of autonomy or independence? "Firstly, I don't agree that independence is impossible. No matter what the political circumstance, the Chinese and the Tibetans are two different people. "Historically," he said, switching his attention to autonomy, "Tibet has been a fortress for both China and India, protecting both countries from attack. But since the Chinese occupied Tibet both countries have had to put troops along the border. So the result is more trouble and worry for both countries. This is why it is in

the interest of China, India, the Soviet Union, to make Tibet a neutral and effective buffer."

Shakabpa is hopeful about Tibet's future. He thinks there will be some sort of negotiation between the Chinese and the Tibetans. He thinks the Dalai Lama would be willing to talk with the Chinese leadership. "After all," he said, "the Dalai Lama is primarily...interested in the welfare of the Tibetan people—more than anything else."

In a dormitory room at Princeton University I heard another view: "Tibetans shouldn't be too adamant about getting full independence." Paljor, who thinks he is about twenty-four but is not certain, came as a scholarship student to Princeton three years ago. Of medium build and athletic, wearing a dark blue jersey and Addidas, he sits cross-legged on a Tibetan rug. With the accent acquired by all Tibetans who learn English in India he declares: "We're making a mistake if we don't try to compromise with the Chinese." Paljor summed up a general view among Tibetans—that autonomy is a viable goal; not as an end in itself, but as the next best thing short of independence. Tibetan independence is not likely, at least not in the immediate future. Paljor notes that China is too powerful for Tibet to be taken from it. Second, China would give up Tibet only if it had something to gain, and it is not clear what that might be. Third, Tibet might gain independence if China becomes weak, but the opposite seems to be happening now.

Phintso Thonden, the former representative of the Dalai Lama in New York and New Delhi, is reluctant to draw hasty conclusions, but he believes that "China would want to settle the Tibetan problem." "Tibet is a thorn on China's conscience," says the heavy-set man with a quiet voice. "You see, the Chinese have achieved much but in Tibet their action was naked aggression. Now they are anxious to prove that human rights exist in Tibet."

Carter's startling announcement that the U.S. would recognize China made thirty-four-year-old Kesang Tashi think of his three sisters who were left behind. "It's possible I can take my mother to see them," said Tashi, who has not seen his sisters since 1956. Tashi teaches at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, and sells goods imported from Nepal and India. He is quite sure that concessions on travel will come about, especially for Tibetans with American passports. But, he says, "the big question is that of autonomy. They may give us autonomy to gain acceptance in the world community, but that's just cosmetics....Or, there may be serious instability in Tibet. We have to understand the reasons why China would want a compromise in order to bargain with them. Genuine autonomy would be good for us." The last is said wistfully.

Sherpa Tulku, believed to be an incarnation, is skeptical about the apparent liberalization in China and believes that "We have to know exactly what is meant by autonomy before we can accept it." He also thinks there is a possibility of being tricked by the Chinese. The recent and startling Chinese invitation to nineteen young Tibetans in India to visit Tibet is one thing that has made Sherpa suspicious. "These youths will return

to spread the good word. Another ten will be invited and they will do the same, and so on...until we're tricked."

Sherpa's suspicions may be excessive, but one must ask why the Chinese invited these youths. It is the youth who have made the most noise about taking violent actions to undermine the Chinese. To ask the question differently: Does China, after all, have something to gain by granting autonomy to Tibet?

Some Tibetans believe that autonomy could be the Chinese solution to the serious resistance they believe the Chinese are encountering in Tibet. Tibetans inside and outside Tibet would be appeased by autonomy, yet it—unlike independence—would leave Tibet's external policies in Chinese hands. In short, China would maintain the strategic advantage it has and badly wants in controlling Tibet.

Ugyan, a graduate student of anthropology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, is certain that Chinese rule in Tibet is not forever. "The Chinese face a fundamental dilemma. If they carry on repressive policies in Tibet, they will perpetuate a separate identity—which is the opposite of what the Chinese want. If they liberalize too much by granting too much freedom, the Tibetans will be encouraged by this and will automatically seek to challenge Chinese control. Either way, the Chinese create problems for themselves."

Reports of what is happening inside Tibet have been meager, and often inconsistent. The picture painted by recent escapees from Tibet is generally a grim one. They cite hard labor, severe restrictions on travel, and insufficient rations of food. The great food production the Chinese boast about apparently feeds the thousands of troops stationed in Tibet. Tibetans are also constantly persecuted if suspected of being "reactionary." These are only some of the features of Tibet under the Chinese, according to the refugees.

In contrast, the Chinese have in recent years been anxious to tell the world that today's Tibet is a successful socialist society in which the Tibetans are prospering. Visitors such as British journalists Neville Maxwell and Felix Greene have visited Tibet in recent years and have nothing but praise for the Chinese achievements there. But they do not dispute the fact that the leadership in Tibet is composed mainly of Chinese from the mainland. Maxwell, for one, apologized for this in his talks in the United States about two years ago. Tibet's backwardness, he said, made a dominantly Han leadership in Tibet a necessary temporary phase. Besides being a lame apology, presumably provided by the Chinese, this argument demonstrates that Han chauvinism is very much alive. It is not the white man's burden but the Han's burden to bring salvation to the Tibetan people.

But if the Chinese are the rulers, Tibetans—whether Communist or not—live under conditions that inevitably reinforce a separate Tibetan identity. One Tibetan I spoke with believes that it does not matter if the Tibetans are enjoying more material benefits, though this, too, is questionable. It is quite likely that better-fed Tibetans would oppose foreign rule. "They might resist, not necessarily for old Tibet, but for Tibet....A Tibetan is first a Tibetan: ideological differences come second."

A Tibetan with socialist ideals is thirty-three-year-old Tenzing Chhodak, a graduate student in education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In a conversation at his Amherst apartment Tenzing hopes Tibet will achieve an autonomous status—comparable to that of Outer Mongolia. It would come “not from external pressure, but from the contradictions within society.” Tenzing, a soft-spoken man from the eastern Tibetan province of Kham, spelled out his theory. “After twenty years, you have to expect Tibetans in Tibet—perhaps not all of them—to think like socialists. These Tibetans are frustrated by the inconsistency between theory and practice. The issue is fundamentally a nationalist one. Nobody likes foreigners to rule them, especially in their own country. Not only that,” Tenzing said, “but the scholars in China, the serious socialists—those who are committed to socialist ideals—they too can’t resolve the contradiction of their rule in Tibet. They will support the Tibetans. The fact is the Chinese did not go to Tibet to liberate it. They wanted Tibet for strategic reasons. So China’s mission in Tibet is doomed to failure because of contradictions internal to itself.”

What about the argument that these contradictions will not develop because Tibetans are living better in Tibet? “First, that’s not certain. I don’t think the older Tibetans who couldn’t adapt to the system are better off. Maybe the younger people, yes. But that is not crucial. Only those with a colonial mentality make that argument,” said Tenzing calmly. “They justified British rule in India because ‘the Indians were better off.’ Anyway, how could they be living better when Tibet and the other autonomous regions are all under military government?”

Many observers of the Tibetan situation see it as a contest between a theocratic system and a Communist system. They perceive the Tibetan refugees as being anti-Communist and pro-Buddhist, and there can be room for only one—Buddhism or communism. But this is not completely accurate. There are many Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama, who do not justify the religious institutions as they existed, who in fact believe that reforms were necessary. Few want to return to the old state of affairs. “There is no need to return to the old days,” the Dalai Lama has said. Further, many younger Tibetans have expressed a preference for socialism. Their leader, the Dalai Lama, has repeatedly said “Communism is compatible to Buddhism if both are pure.”

Will the Tibetan refugees and the Tibetans in Tibet be able to agree on common goals? All the Tibetans interviewed said they expected differences between their fellow countrymen in Tibet and themselves. But they are optimistic that, if autonomy is achieved, they will be able to reach a workable solution. Tenzing, in Massachusetts, said the majority of the Tibetans, educated in socialist attitudes, would win out over their Western-educated or religious counterparts.

Does that mean there will be no place for the Dalai Lama? “Not necessarily,” Tenzing quickly replied. “He is an individual: he can return to Tibet...in fact, he could be our leader,” declared this student of Marx, Engels, and Mao. “Buddha was a revolutionary in his time, he

started a social movement...so I don’t see an inherent contradiction between Buddhist and Marxist thought.”

It is hard, if not impossible, to find Tibetans who do not want the Dalai Lama as their leader. A few say they would want the Dalai Lama as their leader no matter what kind of government is installed, as long as Tibet had genuine autonomy. Others believe the Dalai Lama would prefer a socialist society. In any case, it is understood that the six million Tibetans in Tibet would have the final word.

Former Tibet Office representative Thonden notes that “there is no prominent leader in Tibet since the Chinese have been in total control. His Holiness would be acceptable among those in Tibet too....The Dalai Lama is no Chiang Kai-shek, but a dedicated spiritual figure. He has no personal ambition and will do everything to help his people.” Thonden has one reservation. “I don’t know if the Dalai Lama will play that role.” In several conversations with the Tibetan leader he had been told: “It’s like one leg is in political matters by the force of circumstances.” But Thonden adds: “Perhaps he could be persuaded.”

In an article in the *New York Times* (February 4, 1979) the forty-three-year-old Dalai Lama reiterated his own position. He welcomes the signs of liberalization in China and in the minority regions. But, he said, “It is difficult for us to be optimistic about these changes yet because political changes in China are too unpredictable.” He sums up the crux of the Tibetan struggle in this way: “I have repeatedly said that the nature of our struggle is not anti-Communist, anti-reform or even anti-Chinese. It is also not whether those of us in exile can return to Tibet. Fundamentally, the real issue is the happiness and welfare of the six million Tibetans inside Tibet. We are carrying out our freedom movements in accordance with the wishes of our people there. If the majority of the people in Tibet are really happy and willing to live under the Chinese rule, it would be foolish and unreasonable on the part of 100,000 Tibetans in exile to stubbornly act contrary to their wishes. It would not be morally right. But we must first know for certain that the Tibetans...are completely satisfied and happy. So far it is only the Chinese publicity organs and their recognized spokesmen in the west who claim that the Tibetans in Tibet are happy....The ultimate decision about the future of Tibet must be made by the majority of the people there. This is democratic: this is reasonable: and this is just. In order to be able to make that decision the people must have the freedom to express themselves without fear.”

The Dalai Lama concedes that China has done some good in Tibet. He has said: “Even without the Chinese invasion we would have had to change our country, to catch up to date, to modernize. If the Tibetans had had to do it alone, there would have been many obstacles. All that difficulty was overcome by the Chinese.”

The Dalai Lama is ready to talk with the Chinese when they are ready. In writing this article, I requested the Chinese U.N. Mission to grant an interview. They did not want to talk about Tibet. Apparently, the Chinese are not yet ready. [WV]